

# **RUSSIAN ELITE IMAGE OF IRAN: FROM THE LATE SOVIET ERA TO THE PRESENT**

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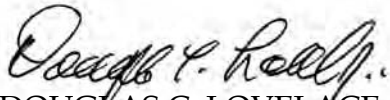
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## FOREWORD

Since the late Soviet era, the presence of Iran has loomed large in the minds of the Russian elite. Their vision of Iran has been incorporated in the general view of the Russian relationship with the Muslim world. Soon after the end of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) – and even before – increasing numbers of Russian intellectuals became disenchanted with the West, especially the United States, and looked for alternative geopolitical alliances. The Muslim world, with Iran at the center, became one of the possible alternatives.

Iran became especially important in the geopolitical construction of Eurasianists or neo-Eurasianists who believed that Russia's alliance with Iran is essential for Russia's rise to power. Yet, by the middle of Russian President Vladimir Putin's tenure, increasing tension with the Muslim community and the rise of Russian nationalism had led to more complicated views of the Russian elite on Iran. At present, the Russian elite does not mind using Iran as a bargaining chip in its dealings with the West, especially the United States, and as a market for Russian weapons and other goods and services. However, the dream of a Russian-Iran axis is apparently abandoned for good.



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## SUMMARY

The evolution of the Russian elite's view of Iran is traced over the past 20 years of post-Soviet history. The major thesis and outcome are as follows.

1. During most of the late Soviet and post-Soviet period, two major trends in the approach to Iran have dominated the Russian elite. The first emphasizes the strategic importance of Russia's rapprochement with Iran and is mostly supported by Russian Imperial Nationalists, notably those defined as "Eurasianists." For these groups, an Iran-Russia rapprochement would not be a temporary use of Iran as a bargaining chip in dealing with the West, but a permanent alliance.

The second group believes that Russia should use Iran as a bargaining chip in dealing with the United States and as a useful trade partner, but not a permanent ally. Supporters of this view usually see Russia either as a self-contained country or as close to the West, mostly Europe.

2. Eurasianism and similar brands of Russian nationalism became popular starting in the early Soviet era, reaching a peak by the beginning of the Vladimir Putin era. By then, elements of Eurasianism had been integrated into the ideology of the upper echelon of the elite, including Putin. Thoughts about a possible, at least loose, strategic alliance with Iran were also becoming popular. Yet soon after the beginning of Putin's tenure, an opposite trend started to develop, and skepticism toward Iran and its relationship with Russia grew. This trend has dominated the Russian elite's approach to Iran to the present, regardless of the vacillation in Russian foreign policy. One might assume this would dominate the elite's view at least for the near future.

3. The changes in the Russian elite's approach to Iran – from the assumption that Iran should be a strategic ally to a more guarded view – are due not so much to changes in the international situation as to internal changes in Russia. The more guarded approach to Iran reflects increasing internal tension between ethnic Russians, still the majority of the Russian elite, and the Russian Islamic community. The persistence and likely increase of this tension is one of the most important reasons why a Russian/Iranian relationship would be guarded and pragmatic, barring some unforeseeable turns of events.

This monograph focuses on the Russian elite's perception of Iran and its geostrategic posture. It deals with the actual implementation of policies only insofar as this helps elucidate the images of Iran and the ideological aspect of the Russian/Iranian relationship. The Russian elite are divided into two major groups.

1. The first level makes decisions or plays a considerable role in making decisions. It includes the president, his advisors, influential think tanks, and intellectuals who basically shape the ideology of the government.

2. The second level could be defined as the legitimate opposition. These people criticize the upper ruling echelon, yet they share some of the premises of the ruling elite's ideology or at least believe that policy can be changed in the future. The ruling elite tolerates them and to some extent provides them a way of influencing public opinion and thus influencing the ruling elite's decisions. These people have been allowed to occupy positions in governing bodies such as the Duma and the Russian parliament; appear on TV; and publish newspapers with comparatively wide circulation. The influence of this second layer of the elite is also

enhanced by the wide circulation of their books and the frequency with which their ideas are discussed in cyberspace.

The monograph considers the dynamics of the Russian view of the elite and the role of both external and internal variables in the changes of images. The role of both sets of variables makes it possible to gauge the sustainability of this or that trend and make predictions about the future.



# **RUSSIAN ELITE IMAGE OF IRAN: FROM LATE SOVIET ERA TO PRESENT**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **The Goal of the Project.**

The goal of this project is to trace the evolution of the Russian elite's view of Iran over the past 20 years of post-Soviet history. This knowledge will help characterize the elite's present vision of Iran in the context of Russia's geopolitical posture. The major thesis and outcome are as follows.

During most of the late Soviet and post-Soviet period, two major trends in the approach to Iran have dominated the Russian elite. The first emphasizes the strategic importance of Russia's rapprochement with Iran. This view is mostly supported by Russian Imperial Nationalists, notably those defined as "Eurasianists." For these groups, an Iran-Russia rapprochement should not be a temporary use of Iran as a bargaining chip in dealing with the West, but a permanent alliance.

The second group believes that Russia should use Iran as a bargaining chip in dealing with the United States and as a useful trade partner, but not a permanent ally. Supporters of this view usually see Russia either as a self-contained country or as close to the West, mostly Europe.

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## **Methodology.**

This monograph focuses on the Russian elite's perception of Iran and its geostrategic posture. It deals with the actual implementation of policies only insofar as this helps elucidate the images of Iran and the ideological aspect of the Russian/Iranian relationship. The monograph deals with the elite, who are divided into two major groups.

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The monograph considers the dynamics of the Russian view of the elite and the role of both external and internal variables in the changes of images. The role of both sets of variables makes it possible to gauge the sustainability of this or that trend and make predictions about the future.

### **Sources.**

Sources for this monograph are related to our definition of the elite. At the beginning of the post-Soviet era, the mass media were genuinely free and people in various positions of society could make their views known, but the situation had changed by the Putin and Putin/Dimitry Medvedev era. Major outlets – mass media and increasingly even the Internet, at least those sources whose servers were controlled

by Russian authorities – had become controlled by the government. Their very existence indicates that at least some ideas in the mass media represent the views of the authorities.

The sources for elite opinions in the Boris Yeltsin era are more complex due to the existence of several, often mutually antagonistic, groups of elite. Consider Yeltsin with mostly pro-Western views and policies and a Duma dominated by Communists. One could, of course, argue that Yeltsin had much more power than the Duma, especially after fall 1993, when he used violence to suppress the opposition. Yet the Duma was not entirely powerless at the time of the economic crisis of 1998 – caused by the devaluation of the ruble – and played an important role in shaping regime policy. At that time, one could define the elite as not just those in government circles but also as a variety of intellectuals and politicians whose views were broadly known and testified to by the circulation of their ideas in the mass media, the popularity of their books, and discussions on the Internet.

As noted above, the Russian elite's approach to Iran, how it is seen in the elite's discourse, has undergone two major developments. From the end of the Soviet era to approximately the beginning of Putin's presidency, one could see the increasing influence of the idea that Russia and Iran should be strategic allies. The opposite trend can be seen from approximately the middle of Putin's first term to the present. The view of the Russian elite toward Iran is directly connected with the influence of Eurasianism, the doctrine in which Russia's relationship with Asia, and, for some representatives of the creed, Iran first of all, plays a very important role. Thus, the emergence and evolution of doctrines, especially in the late and

post-Soviet modifications, play the most important role for our monograph.

## **THE BIRTH OF THE EURASIAN MODEL**

Throughout the last Shah's regime, Iran was seen as one of the major American allies in the Middle East, and its relationship with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was rather cold. It is true that after the Revolution of 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed that the United States was a "big Satan." But the USSR was also evil, though to a lesser degree. By the time of Mikhail Gorbachev, however, the relationship was improving markedly, and the trend continued through the Yeltsin era. And the increasing popularity of the idea that Iran could be not merely a customer for Russian weapons and knowhow but also a strategic ally was intimately connected with the popularity of Eurasianism, which gained momentum despite the overall pro-Western, and especially pro-American, orientation of the beginning of the Yeltsin regime.

The increasing popularity of Eurasianism and related doctrines can be understood by looking at the sociopolitical backdrop of the Yeltsin regime. Gorbachev's reforms, which soon became translated into an anti-Communist revolution, had originally been hailed by the majority of the population as the pathway to a better future. Western skeptics who believed that Russia was doomed to authoritarianism/totalitarianism started to change their minds.<sup>1</sup> They were supported by rising numbers of the late Soviet and post-Soviet elite, who regarded the weakening of the state – in the case of the disintegration of the USSR, the end of the state – as a prerequisite for privatization.<sup>2</sup>

One might add that while the emerging new Russian elite was concerned with nothing but wealth – and for this reason was strongly for continuous privatization – Western observers assumed that privatization was needed for making the Soviet and later Russian economy more efficient.<sup>3</sup> The elite, as well as the general masses, openly proclaimed their admiration for the West, mostly the United States, and regarded it as the model to follow.

At the same time, the opposition to the regime – those who are usually dubbed the “Red to Brown” – an alliance of Nationalist-minded Communists and open Nationalists – blasted Yeltsin for the destruction of the USSR. Their emphasis was not so much on the socio-economic ills brought by the changes but by the fact that Gorbachev-Yeltsin had together destroyed the USSR, the great state, the end result of hundreds of years of history.<sup>4</sup>

The emphasis on the imperial mission of the USSR but not on its social achievements – in the official Soviet ideology, the USSR had been the beacon for all the oppressed – could well be seen by the fact that not Vladimir Lenin, but Josef Stalin emerged as the major hero of the Soviet era.<sup>5</sup> At the very beginning of the Yeltsin regime, this notion and philosophy were resolutely discarded, and a strong state, in the Soviet era and even pre-revolutionary Russia, was seen as a source of evil and problems for Russian society. But as time progressed, the idea of the strong state started to percolate in the minds of the elite and the population.

For the elite, appreciation of the strong state was mostly due to the fact that privatization was completed, and the increasing anarchical/criminal aspect of Russian life not only prevented the elite from holding its spoils but created a problem even for physical

security.<sup>6</sup> The populace was also deeply disappointed with the changes, but craved stability and increasingly looked with nostalgia at Soviet life. The growing appreciation for the strong state as guarantor of basic order had led to the appeal of a strong authoritarian leader—the increasing popularity of General Sergey Nikolayevich Lebed was a sign of this process.<sup>7</sup>

Appreciation for the strong state also led to the reemergence of ambition for making the country a strong power again. Eurasianism provided a geopolitical model, at least on the level of ideological discourse, that no traditional Russian model could offer. Certainly, it was the most viable alternative to Slavophilism that the Russian ruler actively employed, either as the sole ideological paradigm or, more often, the essential ingredient of the geopolitical doctrine that justified Russian foreign policy and its notion of being a grand power.

While distinctly different, Eurasianism is still generically related to Slavophilism, and a short description of Slavophilism is needed for a full understanding of Eurasianism. The basic element of the creed, born in the 19th century, was the assumption that Slavs, particularly Orthodox Slavs, are endowed with special qualities due to their special moral and religious characteristics. Pan-Slavism—evolved from Slavophilism—saw Russia as the natural protector of Slavs and the cementing force of Slavic unity, an idea quite popular among Russian intellectuals in the latter part of the 19th century.<sup>8</sup> This doctrine was often employed by Russian tsars in the 19th century and increasingly used by Stalin, especially during and after World War II.<sup>9</sup> By that time, Slavophilism/Pan-Slavophilism played quite an important role in official ideology. It provided one of the strongest ideological

justifications for the unity of the Slavic core of the former USSR and, of course, additional ideological justification for Soviet domination in East Europe, which was mostly Slavic.<sup>10</sup> Here, the USSR presented itself as a mostly Russian/Slavic state par excellence.

This construction was part of the ideology for some members of the Russian elite in the Yeltsin era as well. One manifestation was the alliance with Alexander Lukashenko's Belorussia. Lukashenko was the only leader of a post-Soviet state who openly lamented the end of the USSR and wished to unite with Russia. Indeed, an agreement was signed that supposedly led to the creation of a unified state in the future. But the alliance with Belorussia was rather an exception; most Slavic nations moved in the opposite direction, including Ukraine, which most Russians saw as an integral part of Russian civilization due to the similarities of language, culture, and, of course, historical tradition. As a matter of fact, traditional Russian historiography regarded Kiev, capital of Ukraine, as the "mother of Russian cities." Still, even at the beginning of Yeltsin's tenure, Ukraine wavered between Russia and the West; and Crimea, with major Russian naval bases, created additional problems.<sup>11</sup>

While Ukraine was not sure about its geopolitical affiliation and a considerable number of Ukrainians looked at the West, this was even more the case with Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Not just the "perfidious Poles," historically at odds with tsarist Russia and its successor, the USSR, but even Bulgaria, historically more pro-Russian and Orthodox, opted for the West.<sup>12</sup> They clamored to be part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and then became much more critical toward Russia than older NATO members. These East European states—until



recently, all members of the Warsaw Pact – proclaimed that, regardless of the changes of regime, Russia was essentially the same: an Asiatic power deeply hostile to the West. In the emerging spiritual vacuum and in a search for alliance, increasing numbers of Russian intellectuals, and members of the elite in general, turned to Eurasianism – the philosophical and political doctrine that had emerged among Russian émigrés in the 1920s.<sup>13</sup>

Similar to many other creeds, historical, or classical, Eurasianism is similar to its later modifications. Still, Eurasianism was a controversial teaching, and one observer stated with an air of irony that there were as many “Eurasianisms” as Eurasians.<sup>14</sup> Still, Eurasianists shared some common beliefs. They all assumed that Russia/the USSR belongs neither to West Europe nor to the Slavic world but is a civilization in its own right. At the same time, they discarded the narrow Russo-centrism, especially in its racist version, where Rus-sianness is defined through biology/blood. Russian civilization, in their interpretation, is a unique blend of Orthodox Russians and Muslims, mostly of Turkic origin, and its borders roughly coincide with the territory of the former empire of the tsars, later, the USSR. Eurasianists – and here they also departed sharply from the vast majority of Russian historians – regard not so much Kievan Russia (Rus’) but the Mongol Empire as the true founder of the Russian state.

It was not accidental that Nikolai Trubetskoy, one of the founders of Eurasianism and one of the most prominent modern linguists, regards the Russian state as directly evolving from the Mongolian empire.<sup>15</sup> The Eurasianists were also quite different from many European observers who, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, while acknowledging the Mongols’

contribution to Russian statehood, saw in it the damnation of Asianism. The Eurasianist approach to the Mongols was altogether different. The Mongols/Tartars were transformed from being one of the greatest evils that had befallen Russia to its deliverer, and there was a sharp reevaluation of the Mongol heritage.<sup>16</sup> The Mongols were praised for keeping together the multi-ethnic empire and promulgating ethnic, religious, and cultural symbiosis, and also for giving Russia the healthy traditions of authoritarian rule and a certain disregard for the material blessings that were the driving force for the West. The Mongols, Eurasianists implied, instilled Russians with "ideocracy," certain metagoals unrelated to material interests. The point is that the elite state created by the Mongols was not driven by purely economic goals but by some high spiritual goals; it was not accidental that Eurasianists emphasized the Mongols' respect for religion and their benevolent view of Orthodoxy (one should point out that both pre-World War II Eurasianists and their immediate postwar successors regarded Orthodoxy as an essential aspect of Russian/Eurasian civilization).<sup>17</sup>

Eurasianists and their ideology were sort of a derivative or modified copy of Soviet ideology. They talked about what had happened in Soviet Russia/the USSR without Marxist-Leninist and later Stalinist jargon. They actually pointed out that Soviet democracy was in reality a totalitarian regime closer to the rule of the Mongols than to anything else. What the Soviet elite promulgated as "proletariat internationalism" was nothing but a sort of integration of the various ethnic groups in a quasi-nation of a sort—"Soviet people." The ideology of the regime—at least what it officially promulgated, the building of communism and the spread of socialist revolution globally—had

a striking resemblance to religious creeds, including those preached by Orthodoxy. It was not surprising that critics called Eurasianists a sort of “Orthodox Bolsheviks.”

Eurasianism was popular among the Russian émigré community in the 1920s, especially among officers of the White armies who escaped abroad and émigré youth. All of them, though rejecting the Communist regime in Russia, were deeply disenchanted with Western capitalism. But in Russia proper, it was almost unknown. Some books and articles reached Russian readers, but their numbers and influence were quite limited, especially after the 1930s, when contact with the West was minimal. Even Lev Gumilev, called the last classical Eurasianist who lived in the USSR, had developed his own idiosyncratic form of Eurasianism, basically independent of foreign influence. Later in his life, he engaged in correspondence with Peter Savitsky, one of the movement’s founders, who lived in Prague, where he had developed the major premises of his version of Eurasianism. Gumilev was employed as an academician in the USSR, and, to avoid conflict with the authorities, focused his research on the early medieval nomadic people of Eurasia and their interactions with Russians/Slavs in general.<sup>18</sup>

Still, Gumilev’s theory was too unorthodox. For example, following some adherents of “Russian cosmism,” he believed in direct influence of cosmic energy on the historical process. And his past—he was imprisoned for a long time during the Stalin era and both his parents were repressed by the authorities—made his intellectual life quite uneasy. He published very little during the Soviet era, and, while he acquired a number of dedicated followers, the general public, even the educated ones, did not know about him and his ideas.

The situation changed dramatically by the end of Gorbachev's reforms when Gumilev became one of the most popular writers in the Soviet Union and later in post-Soviet Russia.<sup>19</sup> His works, most written or at least conceived long ago, were published in huge numbers and have continued to be on best-seller lists.<sup>20</sup> His ideas have percolated in the minds of average Russian intellectuals for all this time. His expression/definition of "passionarnost" (passionary, passion, drive) became so popular that it has become firmly imbedded in the Russian language. Indeed, "His peculiar vocabulary dominates virtually all history, ethnology, and 'culturology'."<sup>21</sup> Even those who had no idea of Gumilev's views or of Eurasianism used it.

The popularity of Gumilev could be explained by many factors. One could, of course, argue that it was just part of the broad popularity of all writers, philosophers, and others who were not accessible by the Soviet public. But this could not fully explain Gumilev's appeal at a time when the popularity of this sort of books had declined. His Eurasianism addressed the longings of a considerable part of the Russian population, those disenchanted with the emerging post-Soviet order with all its vagaries of capitalism, and increasing alarms that the calamities were brought on by outside forces.<sup>22</sup> In short, Gumilev's interpretation of Eurasianism became an essential ingredient of the ideological alternative to the construction proposed by the West. Indeed, the domination of Western ideology in its American interpretation was not complete; and there was a great deal of resistance to it among a considerable part of the population.

In this early popularity of late Soviet Eurasianism, Iran played little role, and the writings of a few classical/prewar Eurasianists such as Vasili P. Nikitin,

who were interested in Iran, seem to have had little, if any, influence.<sup>23</sup> This ignoring of Iran in late Soviet and emerging post-Soviet Russian Eurasianism was not accidental. Not only were both prewar Eurasianists and Gumilev basically inward-looking, limiting Eurasia to the territory of the Russian empire/USSR – but the era of the collapsing empire and regime and the general feeling of mixed anxiety, hope, and despondency did not include ventures outside the Soviet, or what was so recently the Soviet, borders. In this context, Eurasianism was hardly an ideology of empire. The stress was on an ideology that provided justification for the preservation of the USSR or reassembling it in the near future.

Yet a new version of Eurasianism was emerging. And for its proponents, Iran became one of the major elements of geopolitical design, especially for Alexander Dugin.

## **INTEGRATION OF IRAN IN EURASIANISM/ NATIONALISTIC DISCOURSE AND GERMINATION OF THE IDEA OF A RUSSIAN/ IRANIAN AXIS**

Aleksandr Dugin, the son of Soviet intelligence officials,<sup>24</sup> did not receive a formal education, but he had a gift for foreign languages. Because of his family connection, he had access to books in “special holdings” (*spetskhran*) and similar collections that were not open to the general public and not accessible to the average Russian reader. A detailed analysis of the sources of Dugin’s intellectual development is beyond the scope of this monograph. But some of the most important elements should be noted. First was the work of major 20th-century geopoliticians such as Sir Halford John Mackinder and Karl Haushofer. From them, he picked

up the idea of the fundamental role of geographical position as the force that defined the nature of the state and corresponding societies' political culture and aspirations. He divided states into maritime and continental powers, with entirely different political cultures. Maritime powers developed trade and had economic interests as the major motivation for their activities. Continental states disregarded economic interests as subordinate to a higher goal, to create a great empire, not seen as a source of enrichment. Here Dugin, of course, implicitly refers to the USSR. The expansion of the Soviet empire would bring no economic benefits, neither for the Soviet population nor for the elite itself. Conflict between a maritime power and a continental power is inevitable, and one or the other of them will perish.

The second important ingredient of Dugin's philosophy is the European "New Right." This fascination with right-wing European philosophers and politicians has tempted those who study Dugin to attribute to him all the characteristics of these diverse groups of politicians and ideologists, and the differences are often ignored. Indeed, those who elaborate on Dugin's interests, his intellectual/political trends, often equate him with neo-Nazis, or plainly fascists. There are definite grounds for this assumption, because Dugin clearly had an attraction to fascism/Nazism, especially in the early period of his intellectual and spiritual development. One might therefore expect Dugin to be a racist, for racism was the backbone of the Nazi philosophy. Racism, however, was entirely absent from Dugin's philosophy. The "New Right" fascinated him because of its rejection of the sheer utilitarianism of everyday life in the modern West, individualism, what he saw as the colorless emptiness of human existence without a high goal, the

discarding of traditions. There was no place for racism in this design. Moreover, Dugin implicitly saw racism as one of the major reasons the Third Reich project collapsed. Here is where Eurasianism entered the scene, a philosophy of the great Russian empire based on the symbiosis of Orthodox Russians and people of other ethnicities, mostly Muslim, and free from Nazi racist blunders. In a way, Eurasianism became the central aspect of Dugin's outlook because of the internal logic of his narrative.

Dugin regarded the grand corporate state as the pinnacle of the historical process. This state dissolves personal appetites in serving the high interests of the state, seen as an interwoven fabric maintaining cultural identity in the form of the "eternal present"<sup>25</sup> and endless expansion. Expansion and war are important, not only because of the expansion of the imperial domain, the essential goal of any grand state but also because war instills society with the sense of sacrifice and despise of death. War, here, is a great spiritualizer of society, a sort of religious experience, a peculiar type of religious rite. Dugin saw this spiritualized and collectivistic aspect of the regime in the Third Reich and implied that it could be a model for humanity, a force that would vanquish the Atlantic civilization of the capitalist United States, the arch-symbol of evil in Dugin's mind.

Dugin sees several reasons for the Third Reich engagement and ultimate debacle in war with the USSR/Russia. First, of course, the conniving Atlantic/maritime civilization dragged potentially friendly powers—Stalinist USSR and Nazi Germany—into fraternal conflict, in which the continental Nazi regime had perished in a geopolitical *Gottterdammerung* at the hands of its potential ally.<sup>26</sup> But it was not just the

conniving enemies of the continental powers that led them to brutal conflict. There were serious problems with the entire Nazi design. The Nazi leaders, at least some of them, failed to understand that “Aryanization” is not a racial/biological, but a spiritual/cultural phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> People of the continental landmass are all pretty much the same in their basic cultural/spiritual matrix and should be together. And it was in the USSR, not Nazi Germany, where the “conservative revolution” – Eurasianists were seen as akin to the European “New Right” – finally materialized, in many ways because of the absence of rigid racism and a drive for healthy symbiosis of all indigenous people of the Russian/Eurasian space.

In Dugin’s view, the Bolsheviks engaged in building along the lines of the “New Right” without understanding it. One should not regard Russian Marxists as people who followed the traditions of the West and built a society that was a higher form than Western capitalism. Marxists in Russia, regardless of their rhetoric, actually followed or reaffirmed Russian traditions. In Russia, indeed, the strong power, the high goal of building the perfect society (communism), and finally the peaceful coexistence of Russians and various ethnic groups all embraced traditional Russian/Eurasian values. Dugin implied that this leap into the future was confirmation of Russia’s very essence as a Eurasian power; the country of ever present, so to speak, conservative revolution; the dreams of a “New Right”; and similar trends. In a way, the Soviet regime was structurally similar to the Third Reich free from Nazi blunders because of its internationalist/Eurasianist underpinning.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the major elements of Dugin’s philosophy implied the Eurasian nature of the Russian state as the framework of its historical existence. This Eur-



asian nature was an eternal presence of “conservative revolution.” It also implied eternal Russian conflict as a continental Eurasian power, with the United States as its major enemy. The primordial nature of the conflict implied that one or the other would be victorious; the United States would not stop at marginalization and destruction of the USSR, but proceed till Russia fell apart. The attempt to destroy Russia/Eurasia is not driven not by economic interest but by the desire to homogenize the world according to the American model. Americanization of Eurasia/Russia would mean the complete destruction of its civilizational core. U.S. confrontation was Russia’s inevitable destiny, but it could not fight alone and needed an ally. Dugin, contrary to classical 1920s Eurasianists, did not discard Europe. East Europeans—Slavic “brothers” of Slavophiles and Pan-Slavists—were discarded as U.S. proxies, but France and Germany were praised as Eurasian powers; here of course, Dugin, along with other Russian pundits, had noted the beginning of discord between Europe and the United States. Still, with all his appreciation of those that Donald Rumsfeld would later dub the “old Europe,” Dugin did not see them as fully imbedded in Eurasian civilization. Their geopolitical position, culture, and posture were not always totally Eurasian; and they could waver.

The story was quite different with Iran. As noted above, traditional/classical Eurasianists paid little attention to Iran, albeit there was some interest. It was of even less interest to Gumilev, who could touch on in passion. The story was different for Dugin, who regarded Iran as the staunchest Russian ally outside the countries of the former USSR, where Kazakhstan had been Dugin’s darling for a long time.<sup>29</sup> Dugin was quite heartened by the fact that Nursultan Nazarbaev, who put forward the idea of an “Eurasian Union,” saw

him as possibly the leader of Eurasian unification, at least in the territory of the former USSR.<sup>30</sup> Dugin's high expectations from Nazarbaev fit well, in general, for a friendly relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan.<sup>31</sup> While a Eurasian Union with Kazakhstan would provide the nucleus of the reassembling of the USSR under the disguise of an Eurasian Union, the appeal to Iran had implied a much grander design; it revealed an important aspect of Duginian Eurasianism and, of course, the segment of the Russian elite which shares it.

As has been noted, Eurasianism in both its classic prewar and later "Gumilevian" interpretations basically saw Russia/Eurasia as a self-contained unity. Russia/Eurasia was constrained by geographical, cultural, and "bio-cosmical" limits—at least in Gumilevia interpretations—and had no desire to spread outside this geopolitical niche to the outside world. References to the Mongols implied a sort of quest for global predominance, but it was rather subdued; the emphasis was on self-contained Eurasian/Russian civilization. One of the major reasons why even "Gumilevian" Eurasianism was not imperial was that Russian nationalists who wished to see Russia/the USSR as an imperial power could find a niche in the official or semi-official Soviet ideology, with its emphasis on the USSR's duty "to help" the oppressed all over the world. This appeal to duty to spread socialism was a fig leaf for purely imperial designs.

The ideological vacuum after the collapse of the USSR and, consequently, of Soviet imperialism was filled with various ideological doctrines, Duginian modifications of Eurasianism among them. In Dugin's view, Eurasianism should lead not just to unification of the USSR under a new name but to an imperial web that would make Russia even more powerful

than the former USSR, a match for the “Atlantic” U.S. civilization. And here Iran’s role was critical. For Dugin, Iran had emerged as a full continental power that could fully follow in Russia’s continental tradition, much different from other Muslim countries in the region, some of which—such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia—had become just tools of the Americans.<sup>32</sup> From this perspective, Dugin fully appreciated the Revolution of 1979, which had returned Iran to its tradition. Alliance with Iran was seen as a key cementing force for the future. Dugin also assumed that Russia should help Iran become a nuclear power. His assumption was that a nuclear Iran would create problems not for Russia but for the United States, the real threat to both countries.

One can, of course, question the degree to which these ideas influenced the views of the early Yeltsin elite. Yeltsin and those close to him at that time were strongly pro-Western, mostly pro-American. The idea of the resurrection of a mighty Eurasian empire where imperial power was a goal in itself was absolutely foreign, not just on the level of practical actions—which were actually in the opposite direction—but even on the level of ideology. It was the Communist-Nationalist opposition to the regime that promulgated the crucial importance of the mighty state. And it was not accidental that Dugin was close to the opposition. He published articles in the newspaper *Den*, later renamed *Zavtra*, the major vehicle of the “Red to Brown” opposition. Later, Dugin stated he was close to Communist leader Gennadi Zyuganov;<sup>33</sup> at least he later claimed that he was on the side of those who wanted to overthrow the Yeltsin regime in the fall 1993 Moscow uprising. By that time, Zyuganov was using Eurasianist-sounding motifs in his lexicon, and Eurasian ideas, including the importance of an alliance with Muslim countries,

including Iran, could be easily noted in the general discourse of the Communist opposition.

One could, of course, argue that this should not be of big interest to the Communist position, which was extremely precarious after the botched 1993 uprising. There was the feeling that Yeltsin, who had acquired practically dictatorial powers upon crushing the opposition and shelling the Parliament building (the White House), could well put the very existence of Communists to an end. Moreover, those who had participated in the rebellion were imprisoned, at least for a while, and some members of the opposition were concerned with their physical security. There were persistent rumors that hundreds of defenders of the White House had been executed and their bodies cremated to avoid evidence of atrocities by the regime. Their reasoning is understandable if we remember that some members of the revolt intended to eliminate Yeltsin and his entourage in case of victory. Thus, the views on Iran of Communists and other members of the opposition might have been ignored as rather marginal. However, there was evidence that Eurasianist-sounding ideas—with the assumption that Russia was to be a great imperial power with Iran as an essential ally—had percolated into the public mind and reached the minds of some members of the Russian elite.

Vladimir Zhirinovsky, for example, became the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), most likely the creation of the Yeltsin elite as a way of moving the electorate away from the still potentially dangerous Communists. He eagerly exploited a populace increasingly disappointed with socioeconomic changes.<sup>34</sup> Zhirinovsky's ideology included some aspects of the Communist paradigm. He argued that Russia should be an empire much bigger than the former USSR.

The key element of this future grand Russia would be domination of the south, implicitly in the Iranian direction. He declared that Russia soldiers will “wash their feet in the warm water of the Indian Ocean” in his book *The Final Thrust to the South*, which highlighted the importance of Russia’s focus on the south, including Iran. The phrase became quite popular.<sup>35</sup> Zhirinovsky stressed the importance of access to the Indian Ocean and lately emphasized pro-Iranian sympathy – he later published a book on Iran. He implied that a Russian alliance with Iran should be reinforced with a similar alliance with Europe—of course seen as a pro-Russian, anti-American force. Zhirinovsky’s strong relationship with some of the European right sounded quite in the vein of Duginian Eurasianism.<sup>36</sup> His views could well be regarded as eccentric; in the future he would make a name as the most bizarre and unpredictable member of the Russian elite. Still, in the 1994 election just after Yeltsin’s suppression of the 1993 rebellion, he would claim almost a quarter of the seats in the Duma. This indicated that Zhirinovsky’s ideas, including the importance of not moving away from the West but at least counterbalancing the direction of Russian foreign policy with Eastern/ Asian directions, with Iran as the most important player, was popular.

Whereas a pro-Iranian view, in the context of latent imperial dreams, so to speak, might circulate among a considerable segment of the populace and what one could call the quasi-elite, rapprochement with Iran could also be seen on a practical level. These practical actions were not actually related to ideological Pro-Iranianism; Zhirinovsky, despite his stupendous parliamentary victory, had a minuscule influence on real politics. In no way did the Yeltsin regime at that time strive to move toward Iran simply for the sake of exerting

power. The desire was simple—for cash. The decline of Russian industry, including weapons production and loss of funding for science, created a great need for a market for Russian knowhow, technology, and weapons. In addition, there was a great demand for dollars in the face of the precipitously declining ruble. All this pushed the Russian elite toward Iran, if not ideologically at least in practical actions.

Russia started to sell sophisticated weapons to Iran,<sup>37</sup> most importantly, the Bushehr nuclear plant project. The Iranian nuclear program from which Bushehr would eventually emerge was launched long ago, even before the Iranian Revolution, and, as Russian observers admitted, by none other than the United States. In 1968, the United States provided Iran with a nuclear reactor.<sup>38</sup> The reactor laid the foundation for more ambitious plans; and in 1974 Iran signed an agreement with China to address nuclear energy needs; China also was to help Iran to find uranium.<sup>39</sup> Argentina was also involved and signed an agreement with Iran to build a factory for uranium enrichment.<sup>40</sup> A German firm launched the plant building in the mid-1970s. But, after the Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war, a Western firm abandoned Bushehr, not only because Iran had become something of an international pariah but also because it was involved in a bloody war with Iraq during which Bushehr was bombed several times.<sup>41</sup> With no Western option available, the Iranians approached the Russians, who agreed to help. The agreement was signed in 1989, when the USSR was already near its end—as was clear retrospectively.<sup>42</sup> In 1992, soon after the collapse of the USSR, a new agreement was signed.

While attracted by the prospects of cash, the Russian elite was reluctant to sign a contract, since it would

clearly irritate the Americans, and apparently there were second thoughts about actual implementation of the plans. The emphasis was on the essentially peaceful nature of Russia's cooperation with Iran, at least according to Z. M. Zadonsky, Russian specialist in Russian-Iranian relations.<sup>43</sup> Zadonsky implied that in both agreements Bushehr was not the issue. It was only later that Russia started to cooperate with Iran on other matters.<sup>44</sup> As Zadonsky rightfully stated, nuclear cooperation had nothing to do with an attempt to create problems for the United States but was driven exclusively by economic considerations, especially the desire to create jobs.<sup>45</sup> Members of the elite signaled that they would be happy to forget the Iranian proposal if they were sufficiently compensated.<sup>46</sup> When in 1995 they found out that they would not receive anything comparable to the Iranian offer,<sup>47</sup> they decided to proceed with the deal.

The construction of Bushehr brought Russia tangible economic benefits, at least for those employed on the project. According to some reports, they earned salaries up to \$20,000 per month.<sup>48</sup> But the project proceeded slowly, and problems emerged barely 2 years after the agreement was signed. Iranian officials stated that it would pay only after part of the project was done; Russia insisted that Iran pay first.<sup>49</sup> According to Mark Smith, "Delays in delivering the first plant – first ordered in the mid-1990s – have been a source of friction between Iran and Russia."<sup>50</sup> It was not surprising that the completion deadline was not met. Moreover, there were signs that the regime wanted to maintain a good relationship with Washington and preserve Russia's image as staunchly behind the West; and the regime sent a message that it was willing to cool its relationship with Iran. In 1995, U.S. Vice President Al Gore and

Russian prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin signed an agreement stipulating the end of Russia's sale of Russian weapons to Iran—a thorny problem in the American/Russian relationship by 2000. Presumably by that time, the existing contracts would expire, and no new ones would be signed.

### **LATE YELTSIN ERA: INCREASING POPULARITY OF EURASIANISM AND PLAN FOR A RUSSIAN/IRANIAN AXIS**

In 1996, when Yeltsin was reelected, the pro-American, in general pro-Western, course of the regime seemed fully entrenched. But interest was becoming evident in the Eurasian model, with Iran emerging as one of the most important Russian allies in counterbalancing the United States. There was a profusion of Russian publications on Eurasianism, including those that discussed a Russian/Iranian axis.

Interest in Iran, deeply connected with the assumption that Russia could reemerge as a great power, could be seen in the ideology of the elite. There was increasing popularity of the *gosudarstveniki* (state builders), those who regard the state as having great value for Russia. Supporters of this approach believe a strong state is essential for the stability of society but also for Russia's international position. The importance of a strong state as a way to ensure Russia's international position went along with changes in the Russian/American relationship. On the surface, the relationship continued to be stable, and the Yeltsin elite continued to emphasize that Russia was part of the Western order, all problems notwithstanding. But there were increasing signs of tension. This was mostly because, despite earlier promises, the West decided to



expand NATO and include East European states, all former members of the Warsaw Pact. The idea that a strong Russian state is needed for potential conflict with NATO moved from intellectual opposition discourse to mainstream ideological construction.

This went along with the increasing popularity of an ideological construction taken by the regime from the intellectual arsenal of the opposition: that the Cold War had nothing to do with totalitarian Communist ideology versus Western democratic capitalism. The conflict was of geopolitical or civilizational nature, and, regardless of political/ideological changes, the West would be hostile to Russia as a foreign civilization. The assumption went along with similar trends in the West and the popularity of Samuel P. Huntington's ideas about the clash of civilizations. At that point, with the ideology of the opposition increasingly integrated in official discourse, Eurasianism became extremely popular. This could be seen by the profusion of publications on the subject not just in opposition and marginal publications, but in respectable academic journals and influential publishing houses. Above all, it could be seen in Dugin's position. From a staunch oppositionist to the regime as a force deeply hostile to the resurrection of Russia/Eurasia as the mighty power and the rebels who were ready to fight the regime in fall 1993, he increasingly moved, if not to the mainstream, at least to part of the legitimate opposition. He became an adviser to Duma speaker Genadii Seleznev. Dugin's magnum opus, *The Foundation of Geopolitics*, became increasingly popular and had new editions.<sup>51</sup> The introduction was authored by General Nikolai Klokotov, and the book was used as a textbook at the Academy of General Staff. Dugin received access to

television and mainstream publications and continued to publish in many media, including books.<sup>52</sup> He had a teaching job in the so-called New University, and later published his lectures.<sup>53</sup> In all his writings, Iran emerged as the ally most essential for Russia's future greatness.

Similar views were broadly held by Nationalist-minded elite members who, though in opposition to the Yeltsin regime, continued to occupy important positions in various segments of Russian society. For them — they could be defined as imperial Nationalists — Russia as a great power was the most important plan for the future. Indeed, some top Yeltsin advisors proposed an alliance with Iran as most important for Russia's future as a great power.<sup>54</sup> Most of them thought in purely geopolitical terms, seeing Russia in mortal conflict with the West, especially the United States, regardless of political makeup.

General Leonid Ivashov, a three-star general who had occupied an important position on Russia's General Staff and who was responsible for the relationship between the Russian army and the outside world, thought in geopolitical terms, quite close to Eurasianism. Ivashov had started his military and intellectual career long before the dramatic changes that befell the USSR, and continued to be very much a part of the military establishment.<sup>55</sup> Gorbachev's reforms and the increasing instability in the country hardly pleased Ivashov, and the end of the USSR was clearly a great tragedy for him. In the fateful days of the August 1991 coup, his heart was with Marshal Iazov, the USSR Minister of Defense, who with other members of the GKChP tried to save the Soviet Union from disintegration.<sup>56</sup>

On the emergence of post-Soviet Russia, Ivashov joined the opposition to the pro-Western Yeltsin regime. At that point he and other members of the nationalistic opposition fell under the influence of Eurasianism, and the influence of that doctrine and general geopolitical point of reference could be easily detected in his works in the late Yeltsin period.<sup>57</sup> A general acquaintance with Dugin, who by the end of the Yeltsin era was trying to forge a relationship with the military brass, possibly also played a role in instilling Ivashov's mind with elements of Eurasianism and geopolitical thinking. Dugin even claimed after his relationship with the general cooled down that Ivashov had plagiarized some of his works.

Although Ivashov's general views and his approach to Iran did have many similarities to Dugin's, they were not identical. Ivashov believed that the Russian Orthodox civilization was totally different from that of the West. The point was not geographical position, as was the case for Dugin, but that the geopolitical was interwoven with other explanatory models, some of them rooted in traditional Slavophilism. Thus, in Ivashov's view, the point of the difference with the West is that Russia is a collectivistic and spiritualized civilization with a deep appreciation of other cultures and a deep sense of justice. This moved it closer to other civilizations whose civilizational matrix was similar to that of Russia. This was the case with most Asian civilizations, Muslim civilization among them. Iran emerged here as a natural ally.

Ivashov, who had visited Iran several times in various capacities, was a staunch supporter of close ties. This support brought him quite close to Dugin, but their views were not identical. Ivashov visualized a Russian/Iranian alliance as a part of an alliance with other countries, including China. Here, Ivashov

could, of course, appeal to considerable changes in the Russian/Chinese relationship. The hostility between China and Russia was essentially over after Gorbachev's trip to China in 1989, and, during Yeltsin's tenure, the relationship improved steadily. China became a major customer for Russian weapons. Dugin's views on China were much more guarded. He recognized China's importance as a counterbalance to the United States, and from this perspective China was a potential ally. But Chinese/Russian rapprochement could be only temporary; a lasting alliance was excluded due to the danger of China's demographic expansion. Here, of course, Dugin addressed the fear among the Russian populace and elite, who pictured China as potentially engulfing the Russian Far East and Siberia with a flood of émigrés. Iran created no such problem. Another advantage of Iran was that, whereas China increasingly viewed Russia as declining, the Iranian elite saw Russia as an equal or even stronger power.

There were other differences in Ivashev's and Dugin's views as well, mostly related to Western Europe. Dugin regarded Germany and France in particular, as potentially solid Eurasian powers that could be firmly on the side of Russia. He had quite a positive view on the European "New Right," with its often-strong anti-Americanism. He fully supported their views about Europe spreading from Reykjavik to Vladivostok, as a unified geopolitical entity directed against the only true enemy – the United States. Here, of course, Europe was seen not as a geographical but as a geopolitical cultural entity. Ivashov had a different opinion, rooted in his Soviet background: Western Europe, Germany, and France, part of NATO, were historical enemies of the USSR/Russia. Yet with all their differences, Ivashov and Dugin shared a vision of Iran as a major Russian ally, the principal tool for

transforming Russia again into a major global power.

One might add here that the Communist views on the global geopolitical picture were essentially the same. And one could assume that by the second part of Yeltsin's regime, the Communists had been transformed into corporate Nationalists, and Marxism-Leninism had almost disappeared from public discourse even as a fig leaf. Communist views on Iran were quite similar to those of Dugin's Eurasianists and Ivashov's Imperial Nationalists. Iran seems to have increasingly loomed large in the minds of not just the opposition, still entrenched in the army, state, and educational institutions, but also the mainstream elite, as the most important ally that would make Russia a great power that would challenge Pax Americana.

The idea of a mighty alliance of Russia and Iran had become increasingly popular among the well-entrenched opposition, or, to be precise, semi-opposition—remember that such people as Ivashov had occupied an important position in the army and similar institutions—but one should question the practical implications of a grand scheme. These implications were quite limited, even on the level of official ideological discourse. The official Kremlin message was that Russia was, of course, upset by NATO's expansion and demanded that Russia should be recognized by the West as a great power among equals, with the right to engage in foreign policies of great powers. Yet it was emphasized that Russia still regarded itself as part of the concert of Western powers and cherished being a good U.S. partner.

The relationship with Iran was presented as a purely commercial arrangement. Selling weapons to Iran was presented in the same way as for China, also described as a purely commercial deal with no direct intention of transforming China into a counterbalance to the United

States. In practice, the Russian relationship with Iran was also rather limited. Russia continued to drag its feet on the completion of the Bushehr nuclear plant.

Thus, one can see a sharp difference between ideological discourse and real action. Statements about Russia's might, its unique Eurasianism—which made it possible to create a great alliance—became quite pronounced, but actual decisions in the direction of these alliances were lacking. Indeed, the notion of building a great Russian/Eurasian empire in which imperial might is a goal in itself was absolutely foreign to the mentality of the Russian *nouveau riches*. They could use the imperial lexicon in public parlance, but in their real activities they were driven exclusively by economic interests. These interests were deeply connected with the West. It was the West where they transferred their capital, buying real estate and making other investments. They regarded the West as a refuge in case the situation in Russia went awry—and the chance of a Communist *revanche* was not discarded until the very end of Yeltsin's tenure. One could state that the possibility of Communists taking power was not groundless after the default of the financial institutions in 1998 that led to the sharp devaluation of the ruble. Furthermore, neither financial tycoons nor Yeltsin's close circle, known as "family," saw NATO expansion toward the Russian border as a real plan to attack Russia, despite the endless warning of Nationalists and, of course, Communists about such a threat. The upper echelon of the elite were afraid not of an unexpected attack from the West but of a threat of quite a different nature. They were afraid that there might be some unexpected outburst from below, similar to the events of 1993, which they would not be able to quell. And for this reason, they continued to look at the West as a safe haven in case of calamity.

The West was the place where they could move and where they had already made preparations for a safe, comfortable landing—accounts in foreign banks, real estate, and similar undertakings. For this reason, they never totally embraced, at least publicly, Nationalist/imperial philosophy, including that idea of a Russian/Iranian axis. Even less could this move be traced in real politics.

### **THE NATO/SERBIAN WAR AND THE FOUNDATION FOR PUTIN'S EARLY GEOPOLITICAL POSTURE**

The NATO/Serbian War led to an abrupt change in the elite view in 1999. This event would play a considerable role in the Russian elite's thinking and various geopolitical gestures, including the approach to Iran.

As noted earlier, the Nationalist/Communist opposition to Yeltsin's regime and his generally pro-Western policies repeated endlessly that the West was still deeply hostile, and that the friendly smiles and handshakes of Western leaders were the deceptive cover of predators. This statement was ejected by the Yeltsin elite as essentially nonsense, despite its increasing unease with the expanding NATO. NATO's attack against Serbia, which most Russians, regardless of political affiliation, saw as a friendly Orthodox Slavic country, was a big shock, even for pro-Western liberals.

At this point, the idea that the West could, indeed, strike Russia became not just an assertion of opposition or semi-opposition but one held by at least a considerable part of the mainstream. A clear sign of the sharp decline of Western/Russian trust was the dramatic action of Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov,

who turned his plane around in midair enroute to the United States to negotiate a loan. A dramatic reorientation of Russian foreign policy was apparently discussed at the very top, and the Asiatic direction was seen as quite visible. Indeed, Primakov entertained the idea of a broad geopolitical axis that would include Russia, China, and India, and that was regarded by some Russian pundits as a sort of crypto-Eurasianist axis. While Iran was not named as a potential part of the axis, it was implicitly present. Primakov was trained as a Middle East specialist and would have a professional interest in the Arabs and Iranians. The ideas of Eurasianism and Imperial Nationalism of the Ivashov type seemed to be the ideological foundation of the regime after Putin's assent to the presidency in 2000.

## **THE BEGINNING OF PUTIN'S TENURE AND THE PICK OF THE DREAMS OF AN IRANIAN/ RUSSIAN AXIS**

From the very beginning of his tenure, Putin proclaimed that building a strong state and restoring Russia's worldwide standing were his major priorities. He quickly consolidated his power by increasing Moscow's control over the provincial governors, who had often behaved as almost independent rulers by the end of Yeltsin's regime. He also clipped the wings of some financial tycoons, putting some in prison and driving others to emigrate; this dramatically increased his power over the remaining moguls who had amassed enormous wealth through shady deeds and had considerable political clout during Yeltsin's presidency. Putin's foreign policy initiative was also conspicuously Asian-oriented and aimed to demonstrate that Russia again was a major power. For



the first time since the late Soviet era, power was seen, or at least projected to the public, as a goal in itself, not just a way of getting this or that material benefit. The Eastern direction acquired new importance and was portrayed to the global community and the Russian public as an attempt to restore Russia's position as a great power, not just to get economic benefits and leverage in dealing with the West.

One of the manifestations of this "turn to the East" was Putin's 2000 visit to China where he signed a treaty that appeared to some Western observers as almost a military alliance. Putin also made trips to North Korea and Cuba in 2000, all three countries sworn enemies of the United States. In this new, apparently solidly Eurasian policy, Iran appeared as an important building block. The most dramatic action was scrapping the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement and full resumption of the sale of sophisticated weapons to Tehran. The prospect delighted the Iranians, whose delegation to Russia proposed much closer ties and the transformation of Iran into a major customer for Russia's military hardware. One could assume that they were not alone in welcoming Putin's anti-American, implicitly Eurasian posture.

North Korea and China were both glad to play the Russian card at a time when the U.S.-China relationship demonstrated considerable tension. Indeed, at that time, a U.S. reconnaissance plane was forced to land in China; and considerable effort by Washington was needed to gain its release. A clear Eurasian/National Imperial geopolitical posture—with Iran and other Asian nations as essential elements of the design—seemed to confirm the regime's benevolence to ideologists and groups that were still in the shadow of the past or out of favor.

Yevgeny Primakov, the crypto-Eurasianist with the grand plan for an Asian axis and sacked as Prime Minister at the end of the Yeltsin era, had been returned to the top of the political Olympus as a geopolitical guru. While some of the “Red to Brown” were disappointed that Gennadi Zyuganov had not become president, Aleksandr Prokhanov, editor of *Zavtra*, was fairly pleased with Putin. Originally, he saw little difference between Putin’s geopolitical designs—forging a Russian/Iranian axis seemed to be an important element—and those of the Communists. Prokhanov was much disappointed with the Communists, who did not dare face Yeltsin openly. The love affair between Prokhanov and Putin had been strengthened when Prokhanov was invited to the Kremlin for conversation with a new Russian leader who, Prokhanov believed, would make a decisive step toward returning Russia to its former greatness. Imperial Nationalists with their Eurasianist proclivities and views, not much different from those of the majority of Nationalists, were also originally heartened. Ivashov was surely among those originally optimistic in regard to Putin, for he undoubtedly believed that Putin, ex-KGB member, would move in the direction of transforming Russia into a great imperial Eurasian power.<sup>58</sup> If no such push were done, Russia would fall apart, with borders possibly reduced to those in the 15th and 16th centuries.<sup>59</sup>

Most important for the Russian elite’s approach to Iran was Dugin’s position, for he was the most ardent advocate of a Russia/Iran permanent geopolitical marriage. Dugin was extremely excited by Putin’s rise to power, and his vision of the post-Yeltsin era was certainly shared by others. It was a craving not just for strong power that would end the criminalized anarchy

that had created problems for all Russian society – elite and masses alike – but for bloody vengeance. These feelings were especially popular among the masses, most of whom regarded post-Soviet development as a sheer disaster that made it possible for a few *nouveaux riche* to amass enormous fortunes but drove the majority to misery. This sense of social injustice was deeply interwoven with the sense of the collapse of the USSR – the mighty Eurasian state. This nostalgia was shared not only by the “Red to Brown” folk, as at the beginning of the Yeltsin era, but by a much broader segment of the population. People wished for a sort of a bloody catharsis of rejuvenation, which would lead not only to the restoration of social justice, but also to the restoration of the Russian state to that of its legitimate place in the new world order.

Dugin fully supported this view of the emerging Putin regime and prophesied that Putin would soon engage in a gothic type of repression against those responsible for the destruction of the USSR. This transformation would lead to a web of Eurasian alliances, with the Russia-Iran axis one of the most important parts. Dugin believed he was the one who would provide the regime with intellectual guidance, and it seemed his dreams were about to materialize. The regime sent him encouraging signals. He continued to advise Gennady Seleznev, “the speaker of the State Duma from 1996 to 2003,” and became “chairman of the Geopolitical Expertise Section of the Duma’s consultative National Security Council. His Center for Geopolitical Expertise and his lectures at the Military Academy of General Staff has earned him financial support from military circles.”<sup>60</sup>

Dugin had quickly transformed his Eurasian movement into a party. This could not be done without at least indirect encouragement from above. The Congress and party organization required considerable funds and presumably the blessing of a friend in the Kremlin; most likely, direct financial support made it possible to engage in the venture. The change in Dugin's fortune could be seen even in the appearance of his office. When the author of this piece saw him in the 1990s, Dugin had an office in a small room in the building of one of the small Moscow libraries. At the beginning of Putin's tenure, I met Dugin in a spacious office with Putin's portrait on the wall. Dugin also continued to publish prolifically.<sup>61</sup> He believed his hour had come and that he, possibly with other similar intellectuals, would be the major ideologist of the regime. This position seems to have been ensured by Putin's visible attachment to Eurasianist ideology, for example, his praise of Gumilev as "the great Eurasianist of our time."<sup>62</sup> Quite a few other observers shared this view.

Yet even at that time the major *modus operandi* of the regime was beginning to reveal itself, demonstrating that while the ideological entourage of Putin's regime looked different from Yeltsin's, the practical implications revealed much consistency. The imperial East-oriented ideology and some appropriate actions were combined with quite different postulates and deeds. First and most important, ideological toughness and imperial language were not always translated into practice. Second, even the ideological stance was not always consistent, including that related to Iran.<sup>63</sup> To start with, while engaging in arms sales to Iran, Putin refrained from selling anything that could be used to make Iran nuclear and made it clear that Russia would

not engage in a military confrontation with the United States. Moreover, Russia's imperial posture and turn to the East coincided with an equally vigorous turn to the West, particularly the United States. After the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks, Putin was the first world leader to offer help to President George Bush, and fully acquiesced to American bases in Central Asia.

The Western direction continued even after the American invasion of Iraq and promulgation of the "neocon" doctrine that justified striking wherever the United States found it necessary to fight terrorism, or, to be precise, to defend its national interests. The strike was almost as unsettling as the Yugoslavia/Serbia war 4 years earlier. Yet at least at the beginning, it pushed Russia closer not to Asia, but to Germany and France. The appeal to these countries seemed not to derail Eurasian geopolitical designs. Indeed, for quite a few post-Soviet Eurasianists, or neo-Eurasianists, France and Germany were part of Eurasia. Dugin, for example, assumed that an alliance with France and Germany could well reinforce a Russian-Iranian axis. Still, a decisive turn to Europe was not reinforced by a decisive turn to Iran.

The Russian turn to Europe indicated that its Iranian/Asian-oriented foreign policy was not consistent even at the beginning of Putin's tenure, when Eurasianists/Imperial Nationalists apparently had a strong influence in the Kremlin and were able to translate some imperial paradigms into practice. Even less did the idea of consistently embracing Iran in a true geopolitical marriage, not for fleeting and pragmatic interests, became popular.

Before moving to the second part of this monograph, which covers the later stages in making the Russian/

Iranian relationship, some conclusions should be made. The Russian approach to Iran, especially in the late Soviet/early post-Soviet era, was firmly imbedded in Eurasianism and similar doctrines. Historical Eurasianism paid little attention to Iran; it was basically the philosophy of a self-centered Russian civilization shaped in the tsarist and Soviet periods. The later modification sees Iran as crucially important. This form of Eurasianism blended with similar doctrines to see greatness as an essential aspect of Russian destiny and Iran as an essential part of the web of alliances that could make Russia a grand empire once again, not as a means to get this or that benefit but as a goal in itself. Iran was a true ally Russia should support, regardless of cost, in the same way the USSR had treated its allies during the Cold War era when it forsook material gains and was ready to risk a major war with the United States. Alliance with Iran did not exclude alliances with other powers, for example, West and Central European states, but the gravitation toward Iran implied that Russia still sees itself as more an Asian than a Western power.

Note that at that period, despite imperial, anti-Western, and especially anti-American rhetoric, Eurasianism/Imperial Nationalism had never dominated the Russian elite's ideological discourse and rarely led to practical action. But this paradigm has been on the rise since the late Gorbachev era and, though facing the competition of another approach to Iran—to be discussed further—it will not disappear. As an important ideological layer, it exists in the minds of the Russian elite, but it will be challenged and shaped by other ideological trends. A major trend, increasing suspicion and pragmatic opportunism toward Iran, was quite opposite to imperial self-abnegation for an

ally's interests. There are many reasons for this more pragmatic approach. However, in our view, the major one was not so much external as internal, the increasing tension of historically Orthodox ethnic Russians and Russian Muslims of various ethnic origins.

## MUSLIM CHALLENGE

The Imperial Nationalistic and Eurasian model regarded Iran as Russia's foremost ally and assumed that Iran's allies would be necessarily Russia's allies. The major threat would come from the West, mostly the United States. This threat aimed to conquer Russia the same way as had been done over the centuries from the Mongols to Hitler. Russia's alliance with Iran and similar friendly, mostly Asian, powers would prevent this from happening. Iran was seen not as just essentially similar by culture and tradition to Russia—the Yeltsin regime was not seen as an affirmation of the country's real nature and destiny and would be replaced in the near future—but also as an advanced state.

Those who saw Iran as a backward nation—a symbiosis of the worst of Soviet totalitarianism and the Middle Ages—proclaimed that Iran had nothing to do with Russia. In this interpretation, Russia is seen as a Western country and the Soviet period as an aberration. Even those who saw totalitarianism as deeply rooted in the country's history assumed that this tradition could be overcome, and Russia could reinvent a new political and cultural trend and join the West. This was the view of Russian Westernized liberals in the late Gorbachev/early Yeltsin era. But their influence declined steadily at the end of Yeltsin's tenure and the beginning of Putin's. The pro-Iranian view appeared to have become more and more

popular among the Russian elite. Yet by around the middle of Putin's presidency, a new trend challenged Eurasianist and Nationalist Imperialist views on Iran. It was caused by the rise of tensions between Russians and Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds and the corresponding crumbling of the notion of Eurasian "symbiosis" between Orthodox Slavs and traditionally oriented Muslims both inside and outside Russia.

The problems of Russian Muslims and the Muslim world in general were not in the forefront of either conservative Eurasianists or Imperial Russian Nationalists in the beginning of the post-Soviet era. For Russian liberals, Russian Muslims and the Muslim world were the backyard of the global community dominated by the West and led by the United States. Eurasianists and Imperial Nationalists, while regarding Muslims as brothers of ethnic Russians, usually relegated them to the role of "younger brothers." Ethnic Russians were the leaders. The Muslim parties in the last years of the Soviet era and the beginning of the post-Soviet era were minuscule in their influence, and even the most influential and lucky ones could, at best, get a few seats in the state Duma.<sup>64</sup> But problems with the Muslim community started to emerge, first from the Northern Caucasus.

The war in Chechnya, later spreading to other regions of the Caucasus, was originally seen by Eurasianists and Imperial Nationalists as a product of the West, mostly the United States,<sup>65</sup> which, by using the proxies Turkey and Saudi Arabia, created trouble for Russia. Putin came into power after the spectacular 1999 apartment building explosion in Moscow, where several hundred people died instantly. The real cause of this terrorist attack is still unknown, and some observers believed that it was actually organized by the Federal



Security Service (FSB)—the Russian secret police, successors to the *Komitet Gosudarstvenoi Bezopasnosti* (KGB). But events were presented to the Russian public as the handiwork of Chechen separatists who blatantly violated the Kasavyurt Agreement signed by General Alexander Lebed in 1996.

The response, the beginning of the Second Chechen War, provided Putin, at that time just blessed by Yeltsin as president, an essential image of a tough man who protected Russians and Russia. This image was interwoven with Putin's image as someone who not only protected the average Russian but also understood the populace's needs. Putin's statement that he would "Bump off (*mochit'*) terrorists even in the toilets" became famous. The fact that Putin used the word "*mochit*,"—literally, "make wet," the lexicon of the criminal underworld—increased his popularity. In the growing criminalization of post-Soviet Russia, a criminal lexicon permeated all segments of society, and using criminal argot indicated to simple folk that Putin was the same as they were and could be trusted. And, of course, this projection as the protector of the populace was interwoven with other aspects of Putin's early promise to return Russia to the position of a great power, to "lift from her knees." The attack against the Chechen resistance was implicitly connected with anti-Western rhetoric, for the Chechens were seen as U.S. agents and proxies. The beginning of the Second Chechen War was quite successful for Putin. After much fighting and relentless bombing of Grozny, the Chechen capital, the insurgents were driven to the mountains. However, as time progressed, the North Caucasian resistance increased the ferocity of its attacks—the beginning of Putin's presidency was marked by two spectacular attacks in Nord-Ost (Moscow, 2002) and Beslan (2004).

The jihadization of the movement also increased. Some anti-American pundits still attempted to connect the jihadists with the United States. Dugin claimed that the jihadists were the product of the American “Atlantic” civilization, and that they were quite similar. Both jihadists and Americans wanted to homogenize the entire world and had no respect for cultural diversity. But it became increasingly clear that the fact that jihadists were Russia’s enemy did not make them U.S. friends. Moreover, by 2007 the North Caucasian resistance had finally transformed itself into an al-Qaida type organization—hostile to both Russia and United States—and marginalized the more moderate Nationalists led by Akhmed Zakaev.

The North Caucasians were hardly the only emerging problem. Other members of the Russian Muslim community demanded redistribution of power and wealth for their benefit, and increasing numbers of Russian Muslims—this is a major difference from previous eras—had no intention of assimilating. Indeed, when Dugin created his own Eurasian party, a similar party was launched by Abdal Wahed Niiazov, a Muslim, and according to some rumors a Russian convert, whose real name was Vadim Medvedev.<sup>66</sup> Niiazov’s Eurasianists supported Eurasian “syndicalism,” but proclaimed that Russian Muslims should be the equal, not just “Younger Brothers,” of Russians.

This stress on the paramount role of Muslims of various ethnic origins, with personal dislike, led to bitter confrontations.<sup>67</sup> In 2005, some influential Muslim clergy proclaimed that the Russian coat of arms, which represented St. George slaying the dragon, should be removed because it is a purely Christian symbol that could be offensive to Russian Muslims, and that religion and state should be officially separate in Russia.

A Russian observer, however, noted that the concern over St. George had to do not with Christianity but with the redistribution of power in Russia. This claim was rejected with disgust.

The crumbling of the idea of Eurasian “symbiosis” that relegates Russian Muslims to the position of “younger brothers” could be further demonstrated by Dugin’s fate. He continued to be a prolific writer and fashionable intellectual, but his position as policymaker who played a significant role in shaping the country’s agenda collapsed. He not only was unable to get a Duma seat but was actually expelled from his own party. The party itself was transformed to the Party of “Eurasian Union” (Partiia “Evraziiskii Soiuz”).<sup>68</sup>

The new sans-Dugin Eurasianists were led by Petr Suslov, an ex-intelligence officer. (The “Eurasian Union” party has not existed for a long time and seems to have disappeared without a trace.) Niiazov Eurasianists, who emphasized “symbiosis” on more favorable terms for Muslims, did not fare much better. To have broader appeal, the Niiazov Eurasianist Party was integrated in a form of electoral alliance with a broader block: the Great Russia-Eurasian Union (Velikaia Rossiia-Evraziiskii Souiz).<sup>69</sup> But the party faded from sight, and Niiazov became marginalized in political/quasi-political play. All this indicates that not only are increasing numbers of ethnic Russians not attracted to any variation of “symbiosis,” a sort of trans-ethnic identity of power-sharing with Muslims of various ethnic origins, but Russian Muslims are increasingly skeptical in regard to still dominant ethnic Russians. Various modifications of Eurasianism are increasingly replaced by constructions where Russians have no place in an ideology resting on ethnic nationalism or universalistic Islamism.

The most essential aspect of the ideology of increasingly assertive Russian Muslims, at least for our study, is their generally positive view of Iran. The views of Geidar Dzhemal, a prominent Muslim ideologist in Russia and Chairman of the Islamic Committee of Russia, could serve as an example. Dzhemal was an ethnic Azerbaijani who started his intellectual career as a close associate of Dugin. Both were intellectually shaped by the semi-underground Bohemian circle of the extravagant writer Yuri Mamleev, fond of descriptions of the most bizarre forms of sex and violence, "who emigrated to the United States in 1974."<sup>70</sup> Dugin also noted that Dzhemal, the older, had been an intellectual mentor to him. Like Dugin, Dzhemal originally believed in Russian/Muslim "symbiosis" and was strongly against Yeltsin. He thought the regime had perverted Russia's true Eurasian nature and transformed the country into a powerless U.S. appendage, and he put his trust in the "Red to Brown" opposition. Yet as time progressed, Dzhemal's views increasingly differed from Dugin's. He began to reject the Eurasian paradigm in which historically Orthodox Russians either explicitly or implicitly retain the role of "older brothers" to Muslims in geopolitical arrangements. For Dzhemal, Ethnic Russians and Russian Muslims should be equal in the new, post-Soviet Russia, and Russian-European ties (still important for Dugin, despite his fascination with Iran and similar Muslim states) should be minimal or nonexistent.

As time progressed, their views became even more opposed. Dugin, if he did not become part of the establishment, at least rendered absolute support to the regime, while Dzhemal continued to be in opposition to the Kremlin. With time, his opposition hardened. Not only was the current regime a U.S. stooge and the enemy of both Russian Muslims and Muslims all over

the world, but originally Russia was not a friend of Muslims. The view that the regime was a perversion of the country's real essence should be discarded. Russia had been an oppressive state toward all minorities, especially Muslims, from the start of its history. The early years of the Soviet regime were possibly the only exception.

Therefore, since Russians could create a new order in which all ethnic/religious groups could live in peace and a just society, Muslims should do it themselves. In this arrangement, any dream of a Orthodox Russian and Russian Muslim union became a pipedream. The fact that Russians and Muslims happen to live in the same space does not make them related in any other way. Russian Muslims' real brothers are not Russians but the global Muslim umma. Russia's Muslims are a part of the global Muslim community and should retain the revolutionary vigor that could liberate itself and all of humanity. The image of the Muslim community as a new collective revolutionary force, so to speak, resembles the image of the revolutionary proletariat, at least as it was visualized by Marx.

In his replacement of the revolutionary proletariat by the revolutionary Muslims, Dzhemal was quite similar to the European Left, who, while disappointed in the revolutionary potential of the European proletariat, in the 1960s put their hope in the revolutionary potential of criminals, racial minorities, and similar groups. For Dzhemal, the radical Muslims had emerged as the potential saviors of humanity against the evil alliance of the United States, Russia, and Israel—all bound to suppress Muslims and the downtrodden in general. In this universal struggle between Muslims and their oppressors, Iran played an important role.

It is true that Dzhemal's view on Iran was not consistent. At the beginning of his intellectual career in post-Soviet Russia and possibly earlier, Dzhemal had a rather bleak view of Iran. He viewed the evolution of the Iranian regime pretty much like that of the Soviet regime. The Iranian Revolution had originally represented the hope of humanity, but repressive bureaucraticization of the regime took place in the same way as in the USSR. Still, as time progressed, Dzhemal's view of Iran became brighter,<sup>71</sup> especially after Ahmenidjad took power. His ascendance meant a return of the early revolutionary vigor that had made Iran one of the leading forces fighting the unholy alliance of the United States, Israel and, implicitly, Russia as a part of an unholy cabal of Muslim oppressors.

Dzhemal's increasing contact with Iranians—he visited the country at least once<sup>72</sup>—made him even more predisposed to the regime, which he clearly saw as not following the usual revolutionary transformation/degeneration. Russia/USSR had been one of the best examples where the original drive for worldwide liberation of the oppressed had degenerated into a sort of “National-Bolshevik” transmogrification and the revolutionary slogans just a fig leaf of indigenous long-seated nationalism. The Iranian interpretation, Dzhemal implied, escaped this pitfall, and the Iranian flirtation with Islamists—so perplexing and regretted by Dugin—is not a liability but a confirmation that the Tehran regime is still a revolutionary force, not just a disguised manifestation of primordial Persian nationalism. Iran should therefore get whatever it needed to fight off the Americans and promote the revolutionary process.

Either Dzhemal or those affiliated with him, for example, those who published on Internet sites sponsored by him, proclaimed that Iran should get

nuclear weapons from no one but Russia, for this would be in Russia's best interests. Other observers (from Internet sites) believe that Iran actually needs no one's help: it already has nuclear weapons. But the most important weapons of the Iranians are high spirits and readiness to sacrifice for the common good. Precisely this is absent among Americans, these observers implied. If the United States, in its imperial delusions and belief in its omnipotence, were to attack Iran, it would be not a victorious blitzkrieg but a generation-long war resulting in a crushing American defeat. The power of Iran and the disastrous consequences for the United States of a war with Iran are understood even by realistic-minded American politicians such as the "Polish count." This, of course, was an oblique reference to Brezhnevski, regarded by quite a few Russian pundits (e.g., Dugin) as the most influential person in Washington in regard to foreign policy. His tensions with the Bush administration were blissfully ignored.<sup>73</sup>

This praise of Iran as a mighty revolutionary force went along with sometimes explicit praise of the Chechen resistance, whose revolutionary activities should lead to the destruction of the Russian state and transform the Russian/Eurasian space of the former USSR in an anarchical/revolutionary mix of radical Muslims who would launch a worldwide jihad-type revolution. Dzhemal's view here was quite similar to that entertained by the jihadist members of the Chechen resistance and some al-Qaida ideologists such as Zarkawi.

Dzhemal was a popular figure among some Russian radicals and known abroad. He visited several Muslim countries including, as noted, Iran, as an honorable guru. One could argue that Dzhemal's views were on

the fringe of legality and could be marginalized. But similar views – in less radical form – could be recorded in the statements of Russian Muslims who were part of the establishment. Many of them, while praising Iran, implicitly juxtaposed it to Russia. This was the case with Duma Shamil Sultanov.

As until recently a member of the Russian parliament, Sultanov could not subscribe to Dzemat-type radical views. At the same time, similar to Dzemat, he was a staunch supporter of the alliance with Iran. He stated that Russia and Iran should be allies, Iran should play the leading role in the geopolitical/strategic arrangement. Present-day Russia had degenerated and followed the disastrous path of the West, which led not just to economic decline and social polarization but also, and this was most important in Sultanov's view, to spiritual decay. Living for high goals and the spirit of sacrifice more or less disappeared, and this made it harder for Russia to stand against Western, mostly American, pressure.

For Sultanov, the story is quite different with Iran. He visited Iran, possibly several times, and was impressed with the country. What most profoundly affected him was not the economic or military prowess of the regime but the feeling of sacrifice and dedication to a high goal that permeated Iranian society.<sup>74</sup> He was especially impressed by his visit to one of the major cemeteries in the capital, a place of almost half a million dead martyrs or revolutionaries. He saw it as a place of a sort of holy pilgrimage and reverence. This, he thought, was an indication that an entire nation could dedicate itself to a higher goal and even forsake lives for this. It was this spiritual wholesomeness that made Iran the leader and an example for Russia.



Only acceptance of Iran not just as Russia's equal but as the leader in the Russia/Iran alliance would make it possible for Russia to restore its international position.<sup>75</sup> Yet, rapprochement with Iran would come with a price. Russia must change itself a lot before actually being able to cooperate with Iran in a meaningful way, not out of a purely pragmatic cash nexus. This could not be accomplished without a considerably increased role of Islam in Russia. Without Islam, the entire global community would go astray.

Sultanov's explicit juxtaposition of the rise of Iran as a part of the rising Muslim world to Russia also was directly related, at least in the eyes of ethnic Russian observers, with his own ethnicity. That unrestricted praise of Iran started to come mostly from nonethnic Russians; people who were historically Muslim could also be seen with Radzhab Safarov, who led the Center for the Study of Contemporary Iran. Safarov was less critical than Sultanov toward the present Russian regime. He could allow the remark that by not fully engaging with Iran, Russia had made a serious geopolitical mistake and lost a valuable customer.<sup>76</sup> Still, he is an ethnic Tajik, and can be seen by the Russian public as a Muslim who advocated the importance of the Muslim state and of ethnic kin—Tajiks are close to Iranians.

Connecting praise of Iran—even in a moderate, Russia-friendly way—not just with the U.S./West struggle but with criticism of Russia—began to bother the Russian elite, possibly on a collective subconscious level. Iran emerged not just as a friendly or at least neutral power, but as a power whose rise could be related to the much unwelcome rise of Russian Muslims, who demand the redistribution of power, and that rise of Muslim influence could provide a

breeding ground for terrorist activities. This trend in the perception of Iran coincided with the rise of a new type of nationalism. It is profoundly anti-Imperial and anti-Muslim, and its views of Iran, while not consistent, were mostly negative, or at least skeptical.

## **THE NEW RUSSIAN NATIONALISM AND THE NEW VISION OF MUSLIMS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE IRANIAN IMAGE**

As noted earlier, the various forms of Russian nationalism that emerged in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet era were profoundly imperial. Their representatives asserted that, at a minimum, Russia's lost Soviet provinces should be reunited with Russia in some form. Some believed that the Russian/Eurasian Empire should expand beyond the borders of the former USSR through conquest or, more likely, a web of alliances. Only Muslims of various ethnic origins are Russia's natural allies, plainly because Russia's cultural and political matrixes, shaped through the centuries, were essentially similar to those of traditional Muslim societies such as Iran. The pro-Western, pro-American Yeltsin regime was an aberration that would be removed in the near future. These Russian Nationalist-Imperialists believed not only that Russians and Muslims of various ethnic origins – inside and outside the former USSR – would be natural allies, but that Russians would maintain the leading role in these alliances. They believed the Muslims would willingly accept the leadership of ethnic Russians, so there was a reason for their usually benign views on Iran. But by the middle of Putin's presidency, a new Russian nationalism started to emerge, with idiosyncratic views of the Muslim world and of Iran as a part of it.

Russian nationalism in the post-Soviet era was in a way a new phenomenon, and one could argue that nationalism was born in Russia only then. One, of course, could state that this claim is not true, that nationalism is an ideology that has existed in Russia for centuries. Still, we must remember that in the 18th and most of the 19th centuries, nationalism was mostly an intellectual construction of a narrow segment of the Russian elite. Even in the early 20th century at the end of tsarist Russia, most Russians—the peasants—were in general completely oblivious to the notion of a nation as an entity separate from the personality of the autocrats. Their sense of Russianness was usually related to language and Orthodoxy.

Russian peasants, of course, were not unique, and a similar form of identity could be found in other pre-modern societies. Even in the Soviet era, despite nationalism's prominence in official discourse since the late 1920s and early 1930s, most average Russians' identity came not from the nation but from the state, and Russianness mostly dissolved into Sovietness.

This weakness of Russian nationalism among average Russians explains why, despite the lamentation of intellectuals who regarded the end of the USSR as the greatest catastrophe in Russian history, most Russians accepted the collapse without much resistance. In fact, many of them regarded the empire as a liability and expected improvement in their living standard after shedding it, not just in Eastern Europe but even in the republics of the former USSR. This absence of deep-rooted Russian nationalism is quite understandable if we remember that nationalism is the product of modern capitalism and the emergence of law as a force that transcends the web of personal connections and blood ties that was the operational model for the majority of Russians, in both the tsarist and Soviet eras.

Only recently has modern capitalism slowly begun to entrench itself in Russia, now mostly an urban society. Private property is affecting the life of the average Russian as never before, despite the deformation of Russian capitalism by corruption and purely criminal aspects. With the advent of capitalism, nationalism started to percolate from an ideological construction of the elite to the mind of the average Russian.

Understanding the complexity of emerging Russian nationalism is useful to view Russia's image of Iran in a more general vision of the Muslim world. Some modifications of Russian nationalism did not break completely with Eurasian/Imperial Nationalist ideologies. Members of these branches would not mind seeing Russia as a great power, but they were not obsessed with imperial might as a goal to which everything should be subordinated. A high standard of living, economic prosperity in general, was, in their view, much more important than the imperial greatness so fascinating to Eurasianists and National Imperialists. They were not mesmerized by the West, especially the United States – a viewpoint so characteristic to the late Soviet/early post-Soviet era. At the same time, they did not share the Duginian/Huntingtonian notion about the inevitable conflict between Russia and the United States. They saw the conflict between Russia and the West as a pragmatic realpolitik-type struggle. And, while fully understanding that competition is an essential element of the Social Darwinist world, they blame the United States not so much for defending its turf as for its irrational and ideologized foreign policy. Indeed for some of them, like Gleb Pavlovsky – one of the leading current ideologists – the “neocons” behave exactly like the USSR of the past.

In this interpretation, the Soviet leaders were not pragmatic politicians but ideologues who believed

what they preached and took the idea of the spread of socialism all over the world close to heart. They arranged the entire foreign policy according to this unworkable paradigm and paid dearly for it. For Pavlovsky and others like him, Bush's "neocons" followed the same road at the same peril. But if reasonable pragmatists would stay at the helm of American foreign policy, Russia would be able to find common ground with them. Russia, despite its problems with the West, still ultimately belongs to Western Christian civilization; in any case, the West—mostly Western Europe—is closer to Russia than is any other civilization. The Soviet period is seen as an aberration, at least as an event that has passed into history with no chance of return.

The Soviet period emerged in several somewhat contradictory facets. On one hand, the strengths and achievements of the USSR were acknowledged, and its political/social and economic achievements were praised. On the other hand, the same USSR—a strong totalitarian power—evoked not only fear but also disgust.

The new Russian Nationalists' approach to the Muslim world—where Iran is placed—had specific features. These groups would not mind using Iran like any other country for their own purposes, such as a counterbalance to the United States or in various commercial deals. But they had never entertained the feeling that Iran is kindred to Russia, a basically European/Christian civilization, or thought about strong military ties with it. They had little desire for a permanent geopolitical marriage, with mutual devotion and mutual sacrifice, which was at the heart of the Eurasianist vision of a Russian/Iranian relationship. Pragmatically skeptical in their vision of Iran, they assumed Iran viewed Russia in the same way.

This guarded view was part of the Russian Nationalists' view of Muslims, and in fact of all minorities inside Russia. These minorities could live in peace in the shade of the Russian eagle. Russians would treat them fairly and, having no rigid racist prejudices, would admit some thoroughly Russified Muslims to their midst. But they rejected any idea of a Eurasian "symbiosis" and asserted that Russia is a country of ethnic Russian and Orthodox religion and culture. This sort of Russian nationalism represented the view of the growing Russian middle class, who, at least until the 2008-09 economic crisis, had an increasing sense of confidence.

Another popular nationalist trend represented the views of other groups of ethnic Russians. The development of capitalism under Putin led to increasing polarization of Russian society, social but also regional and spatial, where the residents of the Russian capital, and the big cities in general, lived much better than those in the provinces.

There are other important social characteristics of these groups, including growing numbers of young Russians. And while at the beginning of Gorbachev's reforms young Russians were predominately on the side of the capitalist transformation of society, increasing numbers of these disenfranchised youth now see the present economic and social arrangements as giving them no chance for the future. These Russians—contrary to the confident members of the Russian middle class—are not sure that ethnic Russians can master the increasing numbers of Muslims. They see the Muslims as not just growing in numbers but unwilling to assimilate; many openly express disdain for ethnic Russians and their culture. The young Russians also see Muslims dominating the markets

and as a major source of crime. Their bitterness has instilled them with racist and openly fascist feelings/ideology. Though not believing that Muslims and ethnic Russians could live in peace, they do not opt for imperial expansion taking over Muslim land. Similar to European neo-Nazis, these Russian minorities opt for isolation/parochialism. Their desire, if not to purge all Muslims (in fact, anyone who does not look European) from Russia, is at least to minimize their presence. Moreover, quite a few of these people wish to shed the enclaves where Russians do not dominate completely. Some even see Moscow as an imperial capital that fattens itself at the expense of the rest of the country. In their views, Moscow is a non-Russian city not just by its policies, but also by its ethnic composition – non-Russian, nonwhite people. Consequently, they regard the entire Russian state in its present form as hostile to them and wish its disintegration. Their ideal is a much smaller but ethnically homogeneous Russian republic where the principle “Russia for Russians” would finally be implemented. Such people do not think much about Iran. But Iran is a Muslim country, and to these Russians the Iranians, swarthy in appearance, resemble people from Central Asia and the Caucasus, whom they hate – irrespective of their ethnic/cultural/religious affiliation.

Thus, emerging trends among both Russian Muslims and Russian Nationalists have affected the perception of Iran by the upper Russian elite. The trends suggest that the rise of Muslims – inside and outside Russia – does not necessarily benefit Russia. In the strong Muslim states or the foreign jihadist movement, it might create more problems than benefits.

New trends do not mean that layers of previous ideologies and their views of Iran have completely

disappeared. Eurasianism and Imperial Russian Nationalism continue to be part of the ideological menu of the upper circle of the ruling elite. These are manifested in the notion that Russia's citizens are "Rossiane." The word implies not just formal citizenship but a sort of "Eurasian" cultural/quasi-ethnic symbiosis of ethnic groups of the Russian Federation. The authorities continue to underscore the notion of Russia as a grand power that—due to its unique civilizational position—could draw others, both West and East. Russia could well turn strongly to the East if the West, the United States or Europe or both, does not take Russian interests into account.

The existence of Eurasian and National Imperialist ideologies is evidenced by the fact that people such as Dugin and Ivashov have continued to publish in mainstream Russian venues such as *Izvestiia* and churn out books.<sup>77</sup> As to the practical implications of Eurasianist, quasi-Eurasianist, and Imperial Nationalist ideologies, one could point to several joint Russian/Chinese military exercises. But this ideological layer is increasingly influenced by others previously discussed, who see Asia, the Muslim world in particular, as more a threat than a help to Russia. This cautiously pragmatic and often hostile view of Asia can be seen in the declining popularity of Eurasianism and that academic publications on the matter "sharply declined after 2001."<sup>78</sup> And this affects the image of Iran and the corollary discourse of Russian official and semi-official ideologies in dealing with it.

Since approximately the middle of Putin's tenure, official Russian pronouncements on Iran have become increasingly controversial and often mutually exclusive. On one hand, officials proclaim that Iran is Russia's friend, one that Russia would never allow another



state—mostly in reference to the United States—to attack. Russian officials also make statements that Russia is resolutely against any serious sanctions<sup>79</sup> and would sell Iran enough sophisticated weapons to fend for itself.<sup>80</sup> Russian officials also proclaimed that Russia would either provide in the future or has already provided sophisticated weapons to Iran's ally, Syria, and would close its eyes to Syria's transfer of Russian weapons to Iran.<sup>81</sup> Russia seems to be unconcerned that the sale of weapons to the major U.S. enemies in the Middle East could seriously damage Russia-U.S. relations.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Russian officials stated that they would increase economic cooperation with Iran and help it in many other ways.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, Russian officials almost simultaneously announce that Russia is going to support sanctions, that Russia's sales to Iran are quite limited,<sup>84</sup> and that Russia is strongly against Iran's transformation into a nuclear power and will do its best to prevent this.<sup>85</sup> In any case, Iran would not build a nuclear weapon from anything it got from Russia.<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, while Russian official proclamations were confusing and often flatly contradictory, its actions were increasingly anti-Iranian. Bushehr again is a good example. Throughout the entire Putin era, Iran continued to buy Russian weapons. But it has increasingly improved its own scientific/industrial prowess and consequently the quality of its weapons. The Russian mass media implicitly support publishing reports about Iran's progress in these matters. Bushehr remains the only project where Iran completely depends on Russian expertise.

Iranians were also aware that Russia had reaped considerable material benefits working on Bushehr,<sup>87</sup> and even more lucrative deals could be expected

in the future if the project were successfully pushed through.<sup>88</sup> All this seems to have provided the Russia side an opportunity to demonstrate to the Iranians Russia's efficiency and promptness in fulfilling its obligation. While Russia should have finished Bushehr a long time ago, it continued to drag its heels to the very end of Putin's presidency.

The reasons or excuses were many. Iranian procrastination with paying has often had been proclaimed as the reason for the problems.<sup>89</sup> After Iranian complaints and threats that they could proceed with the construction of Bushehr without Russian help,<sup>90</sup> Russia usually resumed the work, especially when the Iranians insured them in regard to funding.<sup>91</sup>

Iranian nuclear ambitions were also cited as the reason for the delay.<sup>92</sup> On occasion, Russia has informed the Iranian side that it will withhold nuclear fuel for Iran's nearly completed Bushehr power plant unless Iran suspends its uranium enrichment as demanded by the United Nations Security Council.<sup>93</sup> And, in general, Russia was almost ready to stop the work.<sup>94</sup> Yet almost simultaneously the work proceeded, and statements were made that Russia would accomplish its task in Bushehr regardless of any objections from the United States or even the United Nations.<sup>95</sup> The Russian/Iranian relationship in regard to Bushehr became increasingly confusing when Russia almost simultaneously issued positive and negative signals.<sup>96</sup> It was not surprising that the work on Bushehr proceeded slowly. Moreover, even when Putin visited Tehran – the first Russian leader to do so after Stalin – he avoided making a clear promise, and he pointed to various technical problems Russia faced in Bushehr.<sup>97</sup> He stated with an air of sarcasm that he had made clear promises only to his mother when he was a little boy.

An even clearer sign of Putin's anti-Iranian attitude was the case with the Gabala radar station. This was intimately related with Russia's worries in regard to American plans to deploy an anti-missile defense shield in Europe. U.S. officials stated that the system should not worry Russia. It would not tip the strategic balance plainly because it would not defend the West from Russian missiles. At the same time, it could intercept a few Iranian missiles. The Russians, however, are still worried. Their logic seems to be as follows. First, they are fully aware that their nuclear arsenal continues to decline and new missiles will not replace the old ones. Second, despite possible improvements in the penetration capabilities of the new Russian missiles, the United States could be even more successful in improvements of the anti-missile shield. At a certain point, it could make a Russian retaliatory strike impossible.

This issue certainly worries the Russian elite. Yet Putin pretends that he believes that Iran is the sole U.S. concern, so he proposed that the Americans use the Gabala radar station located in Azerbaijan and operated by Russia. Putin actually proposed letting the Americans use the station if the missile defense shield plans were scrapped. The fact that transfer of U.S. surveillance to a station in Azerbaijan, close to the Iranian border, would drastically improve U.S. capabilities to watch Iran and help U.S. preparations for a military strike against Iran, seems not to worry the Russians. The Putin/Medvedev elite might even accept a potential strike against Iran as having positive implications for Russia, if it were the only way to halt Iran's transformation into a nuclear power and its general rise, seen here as hardly benefiting Russia in the long run.

Yet Russia's policy toward Israel is one of the most indicative signs of the Russian elite's increasing worries about Iran and the entire Islamic world.

## **RUSSIA'S ISRAEL RAPPROCHEMENT AS A SIGN OF ANTI-IRANIAN POLICY**

Russia's rapprochement with Israel is, of course, a complicated phenomenon and cannot be seen just in the context of the Russian-Iranian relationship. To start with, the Russian authorities' changes in their approach to Israel are intimately connected with changes in their attitude toward Russian Jews. And this has been closely connected with the authorities' approach to various foreign policy issues. During the late Soviet era, Jews were seen as a symbol of the West, with negative implications regarding Jews and their position in the country. Emigration confirmed the image of Jews as actual agents of the hostile West and capitalism—the socioeconomic and political ideological system hostile to the USSR. In the late Soviet and especially the early post-Soviet era, the United States and capitalism went from completely negative to completely positive in the authorities' view. Consequently, Jews were transformed from a negative to a positive symbol; and the relationship with Israel was reestablished and strengthened because Israel was seen as a U.S. symbol, at a time when the United States was viewed as Russia's foremost geopolitical friend and ally and an example to follow.

Putin's rise and the exile and imprisonment of a few tycoons (mostly Jewish, at least ethnically) created the belief that Putin had returned to the anti-Semitic policy of the past. This was not the case. As time progressed, Putin made cautious friendly actions toward Jews.

Before his formal replacement by Medvedev, he introduced the institution of Jewish rabbi in the Russian army. To underscore this positive approach, Putin chose for the position an Orthodox rabbi. His photograph, showing long, traditional attire and beard, accompanied an interview in which he praised the Russian military for being extremely friendly to him; it was published in the mass media. Nothing of this sort had been seen in the Russian army since the 1917 Revolution.

This rather positive approach to Russian Jews went along with the more and more friendly relations with Israel. In 2008 Russia and Israel abolished visas for the citizens of both countries.<sup>98</sup> This implied quite a serious sense of mutual trust, if one would remember that Israelis still need a visa to enter the United States. Moreover, the Russians bought some Israeli military equipment; and, as some Russian observers state, the decision was not so much due to the equipment's superiority to Russian versions as because of political implications.<sup>99</sup>

This positive approach to Israel and the Jews came about for different reasons. One is the authorities' desire to show that Russia is part of the civilized Western world which shuns anti-Semitism and which had been a part of Russian life for centuries. This approach to Israel had nothing to do with a desire to please the United States as was the case in the beginning of the post-Soviet era. As a matter of fact, the relationship between Russia and the United States was rather cool through most of Putin's tenure. Still, the most important was the rapprochement was mostly based on combating a common threat, Islamic extremism; this was where cooperation between Israel and Russia was close.

At the same time, the Iranians, or at least those close to President Ahmanijhad, openly proclaimed that Israel is the embodiment of evil. This negative image, at least as presented to the outside world, was underscored by Ahmanijhad's proclamation that Iran will engage in negotiations with any country—including the United States—except Israel, which was absolute evil. Israel should be completely obliterated.

It is clear that Russia's rapprochement with Israel should be seen as quite negative to the Iranian elite and implicitly anti-Iranian. And it is not surprising in this context that the negative image of Iran as a power potentially quite dangerous for Russia has been elaborated on by some leading Russian Jewish intellectuals and others who share their views.

At first glance, the intellectuals seem to propose a rather glamorous image of Iran and implicitly discard what they regard as the naive image presented by American mass media. Iran, in the U.S. popular view, is a backward, almost medieval state due to its authoritarian/totalitarian nature and the domination of clergy over almost every aspect of life. The regime is seen as absolutely alienated from the masses, who crave liberty and are ready for revolution or for U.S. liberation. These Russian intellectuals consider these views oversimplistic and wrong.<sup>100</sup>

Some observers were especially caustic in their criticism of U.S. pundits who believe the Iranian regime would collapse after a few American strikes or new sanctions.<sup>101</sup> The Iranian regime, they implied, might indeed resemble the USSR in the early Soviet years. But this is not a liability but a great advantage for the system. The totalitarian streak in the socio-economic structure makes it possible to channel the resources of the state to the most important projects and ensures

rapid economic and scientific development. Iran, in this view, has rapidly developed its economic, scientific, and military prowess.<sup>102</sup> According to some Russian observers, Iran's success is really exceptional when compared to its neighbors.

Sergei Karaganov pointed out that Iran has made considerable achievements since the 1979 Revolution. "Iran has managed to limit its population growth, establish a relatively modern educational system as a supplement to its great ancient culture, and achieve a small increase in per capita gross domestic product (GDP) even before the oil boom, which was a remarkable feat compared to the situation prevailing in the overwhelming majority of its neighbors."<sup>103</sup> Iran is used to being self-sufficient over long periods of tension with the United States, and the demand for oil would make isolating Iran completely impossible. Moreover, if the West demonstrated solidarity and tried to isolate Iran by a united front, Iran would not even need Russia, for it could always turn to China, the rising superpower of the 21st century, which would never leave Iran in the cold.<sup>104</sup> While the West's ability to damage the Iranian economy is limited, Iran could damage the Western economy by disrupting oil supplies.<sup>105</sup>

The regime also enjoys the support of a considerable segment of the Iranian population. The masses do not need a government that focuses its attention on maintaining their liberty but a regime that is concerned with their well-being; and the Iranian regime does precisely that. Moreover, the regime has enjoyed a powerful messianic ideology – a blend of Shia belief in a special role in world history with primordial Persian nationalism – and has inculcated the masses with this ideology.<sup>106</sup> The Iranian elite was also able to purge Iran from "fifth columns," a clear difference from Iraq.<sup>107</sup>

While enjoying a steady rise in economic, scientific, and military standing, the Iranian regime also engaged in sophisticated foreign policy, taking advantage of U.S. blunders in Iraq and elsewhere. For example, Russian observers, following Iranian pundits, believe the American handling of Saddam Hussein was actually quite damaging for U.S. interests in the region in the long run.<sup>108</sup> Finally, Iran has a web of terrorist proxies that could create problems for the United States in Iraq and elsewhere.<sup>109</sup> And these views are also shared by some Western observers.<sup>110</sup>

Russian observers believe that Iran is a rapidly rising power, and the United States can hardly do anything to prevent this rise, including its ultimate transformation into a nuclear power.<sup>111</sup> While Western pundits regard Iran as declining and lagging behind the advanced West, but the opposite is actually true. In the case of a crisis of its major rival, the United States, Iran could rapidly become not just as a regional but a global super power. They compared Iran with Soviet Russia, which came about as a result of World War I and rose to a global superpower with astonishing speed.

In this praise of Iranians' prowess and potential, these pundits look similar to Imperial Nationalists, Eurasianists, and, of course, a score of Russian Muslims. But there is a considerable difference. For Eurasianists and Russian Imperial Nationalists, the clear sign of Iran's power is Russia's invitation to join Iran as an ally. Still, the views of the above discussed pundits on Iran are quite different. They see Iran as a mortal danger for Russia, related to their general fear of the Muslim world. They noted with disapproval Iran's flirtation with North Korea,<sup>112</sup> even more so the Iranian elite call to destroy Israel.<sup>113</sup> It is quite



possible that the Russian elite did not much care about Israel; but Ahmanijhad's call for Israel's destruction, regardless of the consequences for the world and Iran itself, evoked – possibly on a subconscious level – the image of Russian Islamic extremists ready to engage in suicidal terrorism. These signs of similarity of the Iranian elite with Islamists was disturbing, even to Dugin. Despite his continuous general pro-Iranian position,<sup>114</sup> Dugin admitted with regret that the Iranian leader's statement in regard to Israel was regrettable, as was Iran's flirtation with Islamists.<sup>115</sup>

For Dugin and his supporters, the problems in the Russian/Iranian relationship are due to Iranian behavior, or at least this played a clear role in complicating the Russian/Iranian relationship; other supporters of a Russia-Iran axis see problems basically on Russia's side. Ivashov, for example, continued to regard the alliance between Russia, Iran, and other Asian countries as the only way for salvation.<sup>116</sup> Ivashov's views here were quite similar to those at the beginning of Putin's ascendance to power. He continued to maintain a good personal relationship with the members of the Iranian elite and was trusted enough to be invited to Iranian military maneuvers. Later, on his return, he stated in an interview that he was amazed by the sophistication of the Iranian armed forces and the quality of Iranian weapons. But he believed that despite the achievements of Iranian science and industry, Iran might acquire additional Russian weapons and that Russia could well take advantage of present anti-American feelings and sell more weapons all over the world.<sup>117</sup>

Ivashov was, however, apparently skeptical of any prospects for real Russian/Iranian cooperation, and this was directly connected with his vision of

Putin's regime and Russia's future in general. Soon after Putin's rise, Ivashov was pensioned off, clearly not at his personal desire. He found out soon that Putin's socio-economic policy was not much different from Yeltsin's, and this inculcated Ivashov with the gloomy thought that Russia's decline would continue. Moreover, Russia quite possibly had entered the last period of its existence as a state. This sort of gloomy view of Russia's present and future was incorporated in Ivashov's view of the Iranian relationship. He clearly approved of Russia's support of Iran; but he did not believe that Russia would be a true ally of Iran. He regarded Russia's position as that of a loose, immoral girl who tried to please several suitors to get gifts from all of them.<sup>118</sup>

## GEORGIAN WAR

Russia's war with Georgia led to a sharp increase in tensions between Russia and the United States. At that time, Russia seemed to have returned to its 1999-2001 approach to Iran. Authors of several articles implied that in facing the hostile West, Russia once again should turn to Iran, providing it with sophisticated weapons and even helping in the development of its nuclear capabilities. In this approach to the country, Iran emerged in the way as had been visualized by Eurasianists and Russian Imperial Nationalists. It was seen as a mighty state whose culture was quite close to that of Russia. And the implications were that Iran and Russia could, indeed, forge an alliance of a sort; and the very fact that Iran was among the few nations that supported Russia in the war seems to have made this alliance even more likely.<sup>119</sup> Still, this brief splash of confidence and elaboration on Eurasian/Russian

Imperial ideology was quite short. An increasing sense of instability led to the emergence of new trends in approaching Iran, which still emphasize the concern and uncertainty in regard to the future of Russian/Iranian relations.

## **RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

As was noted, the Russian elites' approach to Iran was incorporated in their general vision of the world around them. This vision of the Muslim world was especially important. From the late Soviet era to approximately 1999-2000, the view that the West, especially the United States, is hardly Russia's friend steadily increased in popularity, along with the belief that Russia should turn to the East for true allies. In the late Soviet/early post-Soviet era, this view was rather marginal, popular mostly among those in opposition to Yeltsin. Still, as time progressed, the idea began to percolate to semi-official and finally official circles. It was at this point that Iran reemerged as a key geopolitical player and one of the most important of Russia's allies.

On the other hand, the increasing problems with Islamic fundamentalists cast a negative light on Iran, in spite of Iran's assertion that it had nothing to do with Islamic extremists and was their sworn enemy. Recent geopolitical and economic trends have led to a new perception of the Muslim threat and the place of Iran in the context of this threat. Through most of the late Putin era, the Muslim threat – at least as far as Iran was concerned – had an important dimension. It was the threat of an emerging strong, possibly nuclear power on Russia's southern borders, whose characteristics could well be similar to those of the USSR at the beginning of

the Soviet era. At the same time, the Russian elite had, in general, a feeling that the present-day Russia could hardly be an ally of this state. Moreover, Russia could well be a victim of the rising Iran, which represented the power of Asia, e.g., China — and could create a problem for Russia, regardless of any conflict with the United States. Barack Obama's election to the U.S. presidency has in a way heightened these apprehensions; and the Russian elites' view of Obama's approach to the Muslim world is controversial enough.

On one hand, the Russian elite is apparently worried that the Obama administration could make a drastic shift in American foreign policy. The Bush administration was perceived as anti-Islamic; Obama might proclaim the United States the best friend of Muslims. The anxiety is heightened by the assertion of Russian Nationalists, from moderates to rabid racists, that Obama's election signals the end of an era in global and, definitely, American history. In the past, the United States was basically a country of white people, all influence of minorities notwithstanding. Its dominance as a global power indicated the global dominant position of the white man.

According to these observers, this arrangement is over: in Obama's America, non-whites have become the dominant force. Logically, non-white America could join Iran — perceived here as a non-white country. Any alliance between the United States and Iran, in fact, the entire non-Western world, would be directed against Russia, which is still seen as the stronghold of white Christian civilization. This sense of a possible alliance between the United States and Iran and, in fact, the entire Muslim world, at the expense of others, Russia, for example, is deeply rooted in the fears described above. Indeed, many Russian Nationalists, such as

Eurasianists and Russian Imperial Nationalists, see the terrorist attacks by Chechens in the 1990s and early 2000s as directly inspired by the United States. The rise of Iran in tandem with the United States bothers the Russian elite and urges caution in regard to Iran.

Another trend in the minds of the Russian elite implies a rather positive view of Iran that might be compared with the views of the Eurasianists and Imperial Russian Nationalists. But this positive image is quite different in essence from that entertained by those groups. The Imperial Nationalists praised Iran for its anti-American position and defiant radicalism. A segment of the present Russian elite sees Iran as a moderate force allied against Muslim radicals and would be pleased by an American rapprochement with Iran. This vision of Iran as a moderate and, in a way, stabilizing force is deeply connected with the sense of instability the Russian elite started to experience at the beginning of the present global economic crisis.

Since the beginning of Putin's presidency, the Russian economy had been on the rise, manifested among many other things in appreciation of the rubles value. For example, in the last 5 or 6 years, the value of the Russian ruble vis-à-vis that of the American dollar rises considerably. This was a potent symbol for Russians, who believed that while the dollar is increasingly in trouble, the Russian economy is rising. The sense of not just economic but geopolitical might had been reached during the Russian-Georgian War. For the first time in post-Soviet history, Russia was successful in a war, and since Georgia was seen as the U.S. proxy, it was assumed that Russia had defeated not just Georgia, but the mighty United States.

The economic crisis did not affect Russia immediately. Oil prices continued to rise for a while;

and this created the impression among a considerable number of both the elite and populace that demand for Russian oil and gas would continue, despite America's troubles, because of the expanding Asian economy. The sharp drop in oil prices and the decline of the ruble was a shock for them. The currency reserve started to shrink, and the declining economy might lead to a sharp increase in unemployment for the first time in the post-Soviet era. During Yeltsin's tenure, workers were not paid, but they were not formally laid off and could believe they would finally be paid. It is only now that real unemployment has become a problem.

The Russian authorities face different situations from those of the Yeltsin period from another perspective as well. During the entire Yeltsin period, mass violence was practically nonexistent, even during the events of fall 1993 when only a handful of people defended the Russian parliament building against Yeltsin's troops. Most Muscovites either paid no attention to the events or watched it as a sort of macabre theatrical show. This was, at least, partly because those who were against the regime were mostly elderly or middle-aged people. The youth — the most active part of the population — were in general on the side of the regime. The situation today is quite different. Increasing numbers of Russian youth are deeply disenchanted with the regime and ready for violence. Several major riots erupted in Russia in 2006 and 2007. Hundreds of people were involved, and riot police were employed.

The fear of instability is also projected to the Muslim world. Russia became quite concerned with developments in Afghanistan and the clear signs, at least from the Russian officers' points of view, that coalition forces would fail to suppress the Taliban. The Russian elite increasingly worried that a Taliban victory would

spill over to Central Asia and the Caucasus. In this case, their major interest is not so much a drive for imperial aggrandizement – not consistent or strong even at the beginning of Putin’s presidency – but stability and the oil/gas turf in Central Asia. This explains America’s problems with keeping a base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan; from this perspective, most of the Russian elite is in favor of approaching Iran.

As was noted above, Iran appealed to Eurasianists and Imperial Russian Nationalists because they saw in it a mighty, radical state that was uncompromisingly anti-American. This new approach to appreciation of Iran is based on different principles: Iran as a force of stability and moderation. It has been asserted that Afghanistan cannot be stabilized without Iran.

## CONCLUSION

The image of Iran has been incorporated into the Russian elite’s vision of the Muslim world. The positive image of Iran was mostly included in a few ideological paradigms; for ethnic Russians, who should still be seen as the dominant force in the Russian Federation, Eurasianism that should be seen here as the most important.

The proponents of Eurasianism regard unity/alliance between ethnic Russians and Muslim peoples of the Russian Federation as the very essence of Russian civilization. In the late Soviet/early post-Soviet Russia, Eurasianists focused on the relationship between ethnic Russians and Muslims within the USSR and former USSR. Later, their interests became increasingly global, and Iran emerged as the most important potential Russian ally, not just as a counterbalance to the United States and the West in general, but as a way

to make Russia once again a great power. In the early years of its existence, members of this group were strongly anti-American. Still, their views were marginal in the beginning of the post-Soviet era. However, with increasing disenchantment with post-Soviet arrangements and the steady evolution of the Yeltsin regime along authoritarian lines, pro-Iranian views became increasingly popular, even around general pro-western segments of the population, and by the beginning of Putin's tenure seem to have become the essential foreign policy element in restoring Russia's imperial might and prestige.

Yet, even at the height of their popularity at the beginning of Putin's tenure, these imperial and implicitly pro-Iranian views were not consistent, and the translation of even the strongest pro-Iranian statements into real action was quite limited. And, as time progressed, these views became increasingly challenged. There were many reasons for this. One was certainly the very composition of the Russian elite, who were mostly Western-oriented by lifestyle and economic interests and would hardly engage in actions that could endanger them. But there was another reason, the most important for our monograph.

The vision of Iran as the most important Russian ally implies a good relationship with the Muslim community, especially inside the Russian Federation. By approximately the middle of Putin's presidency, there were growing signs of tension, increased by the smoldering conflict in the Caucasus. As a result of this, the elite's approach to Iran became more irrational and controversial. Furthermore, the image of Iran as a potentially dangerous power was increasingly disseminated by the end of the Putin presidency. A positive image of Israel, a sworn enemy of Iran, and



growing Russian/Israeli contacts were some of the salient manifestations of this trend. This flirtation with Israel also related to ambivalent feelings toward the Islamic world and a general sense of insecurity, which increased as the result of an economic crisis and the rise of the Taliban. In this case, Iran emerged not so much as a mighty empire with which Russia could challenge the United States but as a more moderate state, at least in comparison to Muslim extremism. Taking a 20-25 year trend in toto, one can see the peak of the idea of ethnic Russians, Russian Muslims, and Iranian rapprochement standing together against the United States in 1999-2001, with a steady subsequent decline regardless of all the zigzags on the way. A reversal of this trend seems unlikely.

Another related finding is the multilayer nature of the ideological array. The evolution of a new outlook does not lead to the removal of old ideological layers. The old ones are not doomed to complete extinction and could exist with the new one, which could create the impression of a contradictory ideological picture and complicate identifying a dominant trend. Yet this trend exists and can be defined.

What are the practical implications of these trends, in particular the Russian/Iranian relationship, for U.S. foreign policy? Such questions should be placed in the context of more general questions in regard to Russia's general foreign policy posture. With increasing oil prices and general stability of the regime—at least in comparison to that of the Yeltsin era—increasing numbers of Western pundits assert that Russia is in the process of resuming the long history of imperial build-up. The Georgia war seems to have supported this assumption. The recent Russian attempt to create problems for the United States in Central Asia seems

to provide additional arguments for Russia's imperial aspirations. But this assumption should be taken with a grain of salt.

Russia's instability and cool relationship with the Muslim world both inside and outside the former USSR—the relationship with moderate and usually pro-American regimes such as the Gulf states and the Saudis is the only exception—parallels Russia's continuing strained relationship with the West. Russia found little rapprochement in the past with the United States, despite Putin's good personal relationship with Bush, nor with West/Central Europe, despite the Russian elite's close economic and personal ties with this part of the world.

At the same time, Russia continues to be deeply alienated and often openly hostile to Eastern Europe. Russia's position inside the former USSR is also unstable, and the war with Georgia did not help Russia's influence in this part of the world. Russia was not able to intimidate the former Soviet republics enough to compel them to submit to Russia's will. It is also unlikely that it could be rich enough to buy their good will, as it did with Kyrgyzstan, and even here Russia was not successful; indeed Makas continued to be used by the United States. Furthermore, the war practically destroyed the last remnant of good will and memories about Russia as a core of the common state to which all of the republics belonged in the not so distant past. The war was not supported by anyone, and led to a sharp deterioration in Russia's relationship with some of its neighbors, such as Ukraine.

In general, the cool relationship between Russia and other former republics of the USSR does not exclude occasional cooperation, for example, the creation of a joint military force to fend off a possible threat from the

Taliban. Such a relationship is quite pragmatic and, by its very nature, fleeting. With not many friends either in the West or in the East, including the Muslim world, Russia, more than at any other time in its modern history, is increasingly inward-looking and isolated. The major preoccupation of the present Russian elite is not building influence or direct expansion, but a search for stability, regardless of assertive rhetoric.

Stability has become even more important in the current economic crisis, which has affected Russia's perception of Iran. While the proponents of the Eurasian paradigm saw Russia and Iran as friendly powers who were ready to support each other even at the risk of major war, the current Russian elite approach is quite different. They court Iran for pragmatic and often fleeting commercial interests. Russia's flirtation with Iran could also be intended to send signals to the United States that Russia is displeased with certain American actions—condemnation of Russia's war with Georgia or plans to install American missiles in East Europe. The same pragmatism could well be the case with the Iranians, who, one might surmise, would hardly take Russian interests much to heart in planning their own geopolitical posture.

Russia has been against the United States striking against Iran, though even here it has not always been consistent. The major concern for Russia was not so much the increased American imperial presence in the Middle East as that the war could lead to a sharp rise of instability that would finally be transmitted to Russia's backyard. Consequently, easing an Iranian/U.S. standoff would be approached positively, even with tongue in cheek. Russia might be suspicious that an U.S./Iran alliance could occur at Russia's expense. But easing the tension would be much appreciated if

Russia were seen as a part of the solution, and Russia's interests, such as a monopoly on supplying gas to Europe, would not suffer. Russia would also be pleased with a U.S. rapprochement with Iran in connection with Afghanistan. Here, Russia sees Iran as a positive force because it is a moderate state, at least in comparison to the Taliban—a force that could help in dealing with the Afghanistan quagmire. At the same time, U.S. cooperation with both Russia and Iran could be in the U.S. best interests. Indeed, contending with global chaos in which terrorists and crime flourish might be one of the most important problems with which the United States will need to deal in the future.

## ENDNOTES

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23. The rather marginal role of Iran in the discourse of late Soviet Eurasianism was related to the fact that classical/prewar Eurasianists also had little interest in Iran, albeit Vasili Nikitin, a Paris resident affiliated with the Eurasian movement, was a professional Iranianist. Despite the fact that he spent most of his emigré life as a bank employee—a job that provided a comfortable living but which he hated—he was able to publish extensively on Iran. See V. V. Bartol'd, Vasilli Petrovich Nikitin, *La découverte de l'Asie: histoire de l'orientalisme en Europe et en Russie* (*Discovery of Asia: History of Orientalism in Europe and Russia*), Paris, France: Payot, 1947; Vasilli Nikitin, *Les Kurdes, étude sociologique et historique* (*Kurds: Historical and Sociological Etudes*), Paris, France: Impr. Nationale, 1956, which appeared in a Russian translation in the USSR after Nikitin's death; Vasilli Petrovich Nikitin, *Kurdy (Kurds)*, Moscow, Russia: Progress, 1964. Several of his works were also published in Farsi.

24. On Dugin's philosophy and biography, see Marlene Laruelle, *Aleksandr Dugin: A Russian Version of the European*

*Radical Right*, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2006; Alexander Höllwerth, *Das sakrale Eurasische Imperium des Aleksandr Dugin: eine Diskursanalyse zum postsowjetischen russischen Rechtsextremismus* (*The Sacred Empire of Alexander Dugin: Discourse and Analysis of Post-Soviet Russian Right-Wing Extremism*), Stuttgart, Germany, Ibid.-Verlag, 2007.

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27. On the spiritual aspect of “Aryanization” not fully reduced to plain biological faculties, see Dugin, *Giperboreiskaia teoriia: opyt ariosofskogo issledovaniia* (*Theory: The Attempt of Ariosobskogo*), Moscow, Russia: Arktogetia, 1993.

28. On the Bolshevik Revolution as actually the manifestation of conservative revolution, see Dugin, *Konservativnaia revoliutsiia* (*Conservative Revolution*), Moscow, Russia: Arktogetia, 1994.

29. On Kazakhstan’s role in Dugin’s designs, see Dmitry Shlapentokh, “Dugin, Eurasianism, and Central Asia,” *Communist & Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2007, pp. 143-156.

30. Aleksandr Dugin, *Evraziiskaia missiia Nursultana Nazarbaeva* (*Eurasian Mission of Nursultan Nazarbaev*), Moscow: Evraziia, 2004.



On Nazarbaev's Eurasianist proclivities, see also Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, pp. 152, 163, 177, 188.

31. Murat Laumulin, "Kazakhstan i Rossiia: vstupaia v XXI vek" ("Kazakhstan and Russia: Entering the XXI Century"), *Vostok*, Vol. 4, 2004, pp. 68-75.

32. Aleksandr Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki. Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii* (*The Foundation of Geopolitics: Russia's Geopolitical Future*), Moscow, Russia: Artogeia, 1997, pp. 239-241.

33. On Dugin's relationship with Zyuganov, see Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, pp. 11, 109.

34. On Zhirnovsky's rise and socioeconomic changes in Russia, see Juhani Ihanus, "Zhirinovsky and the Swaddled Russian Personality," *Journal of Psychohistory*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1994, pp. 187-197.

35. D. V. Balakirev, "Brosok v Rossiiu ili s novym godom!" ("Leap to Russia or Happy New Year!"), *Kentavr*, Vol. 2, 1994, pp. 121-126.

36. Pierre James, "Zhirinovsky's German Book," *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1996, pp. 49-63.

37. Sergei Blagov, "Russia's Changing Iran Policy," *International Relations and Security Network*, March 14, 2007.

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39. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

42. Brenda Shaffer, "Partners in Need: The Strategic Relationship of Russia and Iran," Policy Paper 57, Washington, DC: Institute for Near Eastern Policy, 2002, p. 71.

43. Zadonsky's statement that Russia's nuclear cooperation with Iran was limited, at least at the beginning of the post-Soviet era, was confirmed by Galia Golan, a leading Middle East specialist from Israel:

In August 1992 Russia agreed to build a nuclear power plant. A contract was signed in June 1993 but not implemented. The Iranians wanted the completion of the first of two reactors at Bushehr, the construction of which had been begun by the Germans in the 1970s but halted with the revolution and damaged in the Iran-Iraq war.

Galia Golan, "Russia and Iran: A Strategic Partnership?" Discussion Paper 75, London, UK: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1998, p. 3.

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45. According to Zadonsky, up to 20,000 jobs in Russia were later created by the Bushehr project. See *Ibid.*, p. 94.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 90; Golan, "Russia and Iran: A Strategic Partnership?" p. 36.

47. Zadonsky, *Iadernaia programma Irana*, pp. 35-38.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

50. Mark A. Smith, "The Russo-Iranian Relationship," Brief 93, Shrivenham, UK: Conflict Studies Research Center, August 2002, p. 3.

51. Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*.

52. Aleksandr Dugin, *Absoliutnaia rodina (Absolute Motherland)*, Moscow, Russia: Arktogeia-tsentr, 1999; Aleksandr Dugin, *Misterii Evrazii (Mystery of Eurasia)*, Moscow, Russia: Arktogeia, 1996.

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56. L. G. Ivashov, *Marshal Iazov (rokovoi avgust 91-go)* (*Marshal Iazov, Fateful August of '91*), Moscow, Russia: Zhurnala Muzhestvo, 1992.

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58. L. G. Ivashov, *Khoronit'ne speshite Rossiiu* (*You Should Not Hurry Up to Bury Russia*), Moscow, Russia: EKSMO: IAuza, 2003.

59. L. G. Ivashov, *Rossia ili Moskovia?: geopoliticheskoe izmerenie natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossii* (*Russia or Moscow? Geopolitical Dimension of Russia's National Security*), Moscow, Russia: EKSMO: Algoritm, 2002.

60. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, p. 11.

61. While Dugin was leader of the new party, he published a continuous stream of articles and one heavy volume after another. See Aleksandr Dugin, *Proekt "Evraziia"* (*Project "Eurasia"*), Moscow, Russia: Iauza/Eksmo, 2004; *Russkaia veshch': ocherki natsional'noi filosofii* (*Russian Thing: The Essays of National Philosophers*), Moscow, Russia: Arktogeia, 2001.

62. Laurelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, p. 10.

63. Noted, for example, by Mark Katz in his 2008 Kennan Institute presentation; see "Event Summary: Russian Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era," Kennan Institute, February 29,

2008 (from *Johnson's Russia List*); also see Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "USA Drives a Wedge Between Russia, Iran," *Asia Times*, November 12, 2005.

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65. Dugin, *Osnovy Geopolitiki*, p. 239.

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70. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

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